The sequel to *Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World*

Dunkard Bottom

a novel

Jon Robertson

Dunkard Bottom

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For Jason

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One

Trouble in Paradise

WE STOPPED AT THE CROSSROAD in time to hear the rattle and hiss of an approaching vehicle. Cresting the hill was a rusty old Dodge pick-up bouncing right at us, throwing sparks from its undercarriage. White knuckled, I steered the 1912 Rolls behind a clump of sumac. The truck sped past the stop sign with half a dozen gun-bearing men in its bed. The wheels sprayed gravel off the shoulder, barely missing us. The truck slid back onto the pavement and sped off. We listened as the scrapes receded in the distance.

The road was silent again. But that was the problem. Everything was silent. The air was empty of bird chatter and dog talk. Not even a suss in the trees. I flivvered the Rolls back to the top of the hill from which the valley stretched west in the relentless rosy pink heat and damp air. The landscape appeared normal enough, its narrow roads curving like ribbons over the rolling valley. The trees and meadows seemed unchanged. Familiar farmhouses dotted the open spaces of wide fields of corn and barley grass. Even my dog Jason knew something wasn't right. He whined in my ear.

"We don't have much choice, Jase. Good boy."

The drive was our first venture outside the village since the Snap, and I was the reluctant leader of a party of four. We'd gone to check on our nearest neighbors: two Amish families, the Schmids and the Vogts.

Beecher pointed. "Smoke."

A former soldier with tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, Beecher's trained eyes had spotted two black curls rising from distant farms.

Fifteen-year-old Georgie Laine flexed his jaw. "That's not chimney smoke, I don't think."

We drove ten more minutes or so when we came upon the gate of Brom Schmid, a farmer who had helped restore our flour mill and whose children had cleared the brush around Dunkard Bottom. We inched down the long gravel driveway toward the white farmhouse, which was barely visible behind a trio of oaks, the yellow fall leaves nearly white, and the red leaves black in the pink sunlight.

"No one working in the fields," I observed.

Beecher's long-haired brother Cody caught his breath. "Oh man."

Then an acrid stench. Two horses lay on their sides, legs stiff. Further on, we saw a pair of Holstein cattle also lying dead like knocked-over toys. Four cows. Six. A dozen. We slowed to a crawl as an entire field of dead cattle came into view.

Cody tossed his hair out of his eyes. "That Snap thing—it killed them all."

Georgie went pale. "It looks like a battlefield," to which Beecher did not respond.

The crackle of tires on gravel was the only sound as the grim acres passed. We were edgy as we pulled up to the white foursquare house. No one was eager to discover the worst, but we had to find out if the Schmids were alive.

On the porch, Beecher shaded his eyes to see through the screen door.

"I can see clear through to the back." With the pistol poised, he knocked. No footsteps. No voices. "Hello? Hello in there."

The rebellious Cody did not take after his older brother much.

"We gotta go. I think we should get out of here."

But we weren't leaving until we had done our neighborly duty. I urged Beecher inside. He cocked a round into the chamber and we followed him.

"Yo. Anyone?"

We checked the house room by empty room and soon found our way back to the kitchen.

"They must not be home," Cody quivered. "Come on. Let's get out of here."

The back door was open so we stepped out onto the wrap-around porch, only to behold a ghastly sight. All six members of the Schmid family lay face-down on the ground in a jagged line to the barn. As though struck down while running, the men and boys were in their coveralls and the girls in their blue dresses and white caps. There were Jonathan, David, Rebecca, and Sarah. The family lay face-down, all but Mr. Schmid. He lay on his back, his craggy defiant eyes and his bearded mouth open with indignation, as though he had not liked the last thing he saw.

While the rest of us gazed in shock, Beecher walked past the family to check the barn.

"It killed them," Georgie gasped. "Even the kids. That thing killed them."

Cody could take no more. He bent over the porch railing and threw up, and I wasn't feeling so good myself. The normally rugged Hagerty gripped a post, turning his head "no." Beecher was the only one not paralyzed with the horror of the scene. He checked the family for pulses only to tell us what we already knew.

Georgie asked, "So why are we alive?"

No one had an answer for that.

Scanning the distant woods line, Beecher hurried us on. "You never know who might be roaming around. We better get moving."

On our way to Vogt's farm we passed more dead cattle, field after field of them. In one field, we saw the tail section of a passenger jet. We were puzzled to see some spreads with healthy animals beside spreads of dead ones. Cody wouldn't look any more. He sat slumped against the door, which annoyed Beecher.

"Cody, snap out of it. Man up. Here, drink." He handed Cody a bottle of water. "Two swallows. Deep breaths. Get a grip."

Cody did as Beecher told him, and he seemed to feel better.

"Sorry, Beech," Cody lamented. "I—I never saw anything like this."

I grabbed the water bottle and gulped hard. "Yeah well nobody else has, either."

I poured water into my hand to give my trusty border collie a drink.

Beecher uncocked the pistol. "I think we're going to see a lot more of this. Despite what they tell you, you don't get used to it in combat. The families. Dead kids. Never."

We followed one of the distant smoke plumes only to find the remains of a farmhouse smoldering on its foundation, its charred walls collapsed inward. Goats ran free. I saw a live goat standing atop a dead cow and a live cow grazing in the kitchen garden without anyone to chase her away. We pulled up to the ruins and checked the barn and yard but found no one. We didn't have the nerve to poke through the ashes for bodies, so we drove on. All the while, I couldn't shake the image of those children, lying like dolls discarded in the dirt.

How normal everything had been only a few weeks before. Had we reached the end of the world? Was this a preview of the end to come? I was torn between cursing the stupidity of the human race and thanking my eccentric wife Abigail for having dragged us to Dunkard Bottom in the first place. How the world had changed. When she first told me about the place, I thought she was crazy. Back then, the twilight still shone silver-blue. The black wool sky was pierced with the diamonds of stars. In actual fact, the first time she brought it up we were still at Belvedere, our sustainable mountain haven. It was nighttime, and we were dancing naked in the cool ivory moonlight.

♦ ♦ ♦

"You want to buy a town?" I queried, not sure I'd heard right. "What do you mean 'buy a town'? You mean like Ruckersville?"

"No, no. Did I say town?" Abigail attituded, her eyes locked on the Big Dipper. "It's just a village, really. A hamlet."

Abigail dropped that little bomb as we swept into the shadow-slashed sculpture garden. That was back when we were still enjoying the easy life. She had ambushed me while my resistance was low, a Chopin nocturne tinkling from the flower beds. My wife's skin glowed whiter than the statuary.

"It's because of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide,* isn't it?" I frowned. "Because of that damn guide."

"No, silly." She gracefully lifted her black sequined high-button shoe to the inside of her knee and turned three perfect pivots. "It's because of the end of the world. It's imminent, you know."

I took her hand and pulled her back to me. She drew her fingers along the edge of her broad-brimmed hat and spun about.

"The end is coming soon, Luray, and we have a lot of work to do. We can't just—live here—in peace and quiet."

"Why not? Exactly."

I tipped my derby, and we pas de deux-ed across the dewy lawn toward the white marble Diana, her bow perpetually drawn.

"It's selfish, Luray. There's much more that we can do for our fellow man."

"Yeah? Well what did he ever do for us? Besides, the end should have come by now. We were wrong. Permelia Lyttle was wrong."

"A year is nothing, relative to the geological ages or waiting in a doctor's office. But the Guide is not wrong. Sweetie, the Guide used to be the most important thing in your life."

I had discovered the guide in the form of a handwritten diary, a Victorian manuscript hidden in an armoire bequeathed to me by my crackpot Uncle Gudrow. My initial interest in the papers had been the money, which I desperately needed at the time. But Abby was right—once I understood the value to the world of those ramblings by the psychic diarist, everything changed.

"The Guide—gave me a purpose in life. But so did you, Abigail. So did you. What do we need a town for?"

My wife spun in place like a figure skater, and the curves of hips and waist undulated, delivering the intended effect in the luminous halo of the moonlight. She was being naughty in our first dance of early spring, our breath billowing in the damp air. She mischievously looked me up and down.

"And yet you seem pleased."

"Not about buying a town, I'm not."

"It's a village. A village, Luray—big difference."

All winter, we longed for the spring when we could dance in the sculpture garden in our hats and shoes and nothing else. Once upon a time long ago,

I had been arrested for dancing naked in a public park—it was my second wife's fault—but at Belvedere, Abby and I reveled safely in our element. The dance was a nocturnal delight to which Abigail had introduced me when she first brought me there—Abby was my soul mate. A smile broadened her face. Her ogee brows poised for victory, she slid her thick glasses higher on her nose and forgave my clumsy missteps.

"Think of the village as an amusement," she said, blowing me a kiss. "A hobby."

"Uh, no—painting sea shells is a hobby."

We whisked back across the lawn toward the nine muses, their heads tilted expectantly toward Abigail's little art studio beneath the mimosa tree. I struck a pose as she turned under my arm.

"It's about community, Luray. The Guide says the human race will only survive in working communities. And what could be better than a made-to-order village to do it in? We'll live like they did in the nineteenth century. We'll have horses and bicycles and period clothing. We'll recapture a simpler way of life, just like the Guide says."

"But the Guide also says there'll be treachery and sickness and death."

My wife kissed my cheek. "Luray, you can be such a pessimist."

"And you're a dreamer. Look, honey, I've never stood in the way of your projects. But I can't leave Belvedere. I won't. You can't tempt me."

Lithe and agile, she leapt toward the stars. I caught her high overhead by her hips, which resulted in a tickle to my nose. For etiquette's sake, I suppressed a sneeze. I lowered her to the ground, but before the Chopin could finish, I rudely broke rhythm and kissed the love of my life full upon the lips. She took my face in her hands.

"I love you, Luray Flitch. You know that, don't you?"

What could I do but collect her in my arms and carry her into the house?

In the solvents of lovemaking, my dissent over the purchase of a town dissipated, which had been a strategy on my wife's part that was easy to forgive.

Later on in the quiet wee hours, we were unfit for anything but showers and bed. Abby snoozed in the crook of my arm, her hair pinned up and shining blue-black in the muted light. I was overcome with affection for her. Overwhelmed with gratitude for every eccentric and fearless inch of her—especially when I recalled how she had abducted me at gunpoint and whisked me, Jason, and *Permelia Lyttle's Guide* to Belvedere. She'd invited me to live with her during our trial betrothal, and within a few months we married. We worked on the Guide together and I revived my career as a writer. I hadn't published so much as a letter to the editor since my Pulitzer back in the eighties, so it felt good to be back in the harness and working in such a

magnificent home.

So why was she trying to ruin everything?

♦ ♦ ♦

The next morning I awoke to the curative aromas of coffee, pancakes, and warm maple syrup. But something was wrong—breakfast was my job. I always made the breakfast. Jason and I hurried downstairs to find Abigail hard at work. Every bowl, pan, and utensil we owned was piled dirty in the sink.

"Abigail, how can you make such a mess?"

Even when the day called for jeans and sandals, Abby maintained an elegance from days gone by—a white blouse fitted close around the neck and pinned with a cameo, her soft hair gathered up and held by an antique jade comb.

I defended my morning territory.

"Breakfast is my turf."

She inspected me with disapproval. "Tuck in your shirt. Please—quickly now."

She set down two plates of pancakes and I joined her at the table.

"Luray, I want to explain—about the village."

I ate. She talked.

"It's right out of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide.* The world could end this year, so there may not be much time. She described the end—post-consumer villages of cooperative people skilled in the manual arts and crafts. People willing to sustain themselves with simple technology and nourishing food that they grow themselves."

"The Guide says a lot of things—but it doesn't mean you have to go out and buy a—village."

"Come on, Luray. It's not as though I can't afford it."

Truth was Abigail could afford most anything. She had been the sole heiress to the Lind Ball Bearing fortune. She'd grown up in Williamsburg, Virginia and had recently donated their twenty-room family manse for use as a period clothing museum by the Historic Williamsburg Foundation. Easy come, easy go. We married in a lavish ritual at Bruton Parish Church.

I rarely interfered with her pet projects, and there had been a lot of them. But whatever she set her sights on, there was no stopping her. An idea would mushroom in her head fully formed on a Sunday, and contracts would be signed by Monday afternoon—cost was no object. Untouched by a devastated economy, Abigail would buy a broken-down movie theater and have it restored, just to see it beautiful again. There were more Abigail Lind Bijous in the Mid-Atlantic States than I could list. She would have an old car restored

only to give it away. She still lived in the nineteenth century. She sponsored scholarships for boys to go to blacksmith school and had founded an entire girls' school for the sole purpose of teaching music, art, charm, and dance. I didn't object to her projects as long as they didn't threaten my low threshold for insecurity, namely anything that could drag me beyond the borders of Belvedere. I had a history of losing my homes.

I thrived in our mountain hideaway, and who wouldn't? Approaching from the tree-shrouded driveway, the house came into view—a sage-green Victorian three-story, a jewel of beveled glass and painted gingerbread amid tidy well-kept lawns and flowering trees, all hidden behind thick mountain-top forest. I never ceased to admire the craftsmanship. The walls of rich natural woods were adorned with romanticist art. The rooms were tastefully appointed with period furniture. The ornate windowed dining room led to a professional kitchen. The structural elements were expertly fitted with joints and pegs—no nails. Also, no adhesives, no carpeting, no plywood. The non-allergenic interior was energy efficient, too, owing to the solar panels on the roof—we sold electricity back to the power company.

The grounds were graced by a manicured sculpture garden, which we maintained ourselves. They included an efficient, raised-bed vegetable garden, the surplus of which we canned for the winter. Behind the mimosa tree was Abigail's design studio where she painted, reveled in her creative impulses, made clothes for historical reenactors, and consulted on costumes for the movies.

Commanding central attention in the backyard was an ornate copper armillary with an eggplant-sized quartz prism that panned its intense spectra around the property on the whims of the breeze. Belvedere would certainly suffice for our own survival of humanity's final curtain—if anyone were to survive at all.

"Luray, try to have an open mind."

"I'm sorry but it's far too late for that," I mumbled. "You don't have to prove anything by buying a village. Now, I'm sorry, but I want you to let this go."

"Not until you've seen it for yourself."

"You mean go there? Me?"

"Of course, you."

I hadn't left Belvedere since we married, and felt the old agoraphobic panic swelling inside me—you wouldn't know this to meet me, but I used to have problems some people, doctors mostly, called severe. Jason rested a sympathetic paw on my knee.

"Well, how far is it? I need to know. I don't take all those medications

anymore—I freed myself from the pharma cartel. I only leave here for—incidentals. There's a possible panic quotient in play here, so…"

She kissed my chin. "Oh—it's not far, worry wart. Besides, once you see it you're going to love it. I just know you will. We leave right after breakfast."

Two

Paradise Lost

BY WAY OF FEMININE ARTIFICE, Abigail had persuaded me and Jason to drive her to the disputed village in her restored 1912 Silver Ghost, the same refitted antique that we'd used to distribute the Guide. I admit that I'm easy where my wife is concerned, but the idea of leaving Belvedere behind gave me a case of the sweats, and, moreover, the shakes.

Only two years before, I was no less than dizzy and confused, taking twelve medications a day for everything ranging from anxiety and depression to panic attacks and jumpy legs. Of course, I also had to take a set of pills to counteract the side effects of the first pills, which included intermittent nasal bleeding and thoughts of suicide. At the time, I had desperately needed a purpose in my life. A goal. Sort of a promise to my long-deceased parents that I would make something of myself. Compiling and distributing *Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World* did the trick. It turned my life around. Driving cross-country in the Rolls, we had sold the books according to the Great Lady's wishes, at a penny apiece. By that time, I had stopped the medicines cold turkey. Ill advised, yes, but I'd been stable ever since Abigail brought me to Belvedere.

The Guide became a best-seller, and the prospect of a coming apocalypse had been trending in the national consciousness since the 2000 Coup. Permelia Lyttle had provided advice to us in the future, those of us who would prepare and survive. She described modern times unmistakably, including "the wars of oil and religion," and told of a cataclysm in our own time. Permelia described economies in decline, madmen drunk on greed, and heartless demons cackling as they gained power. Permelia Lyttle didn't pinpoint a date for the end itself, but it didn't take a genius to see it unfolding. Like a lot of Americans, we stopped trusting the corporate media. To get anything like a consensus of what's really going on, we would occasionally fire up Abby's shortwave radio and listen with mouths agape.

Thoughtless individuals might suggest that I had always been a little cracked around the foundation, that I was agoraphobic and a hypochondriac, but they would be wrong, as I was no longer a hypochondriac at all. For

me, Belvedere was my paradise kingdom on a mountaintop, and Abigail my queen. That was the only medicine I would ever need.

♦ ♦ ♦

Dressed in our Edwardian motoring outfits and goggles (which Abigail insisted upon), we drove away from Belvedere that morning. It wasn't long before the old symptoms crept in. My mouth was dry; my head beaded with sweat.

Abigail looked younger than her thirty-six years. She rode erect beside me, her wide hat tied with a scarf beneath her chin, her gloved hands atop a sequined walking stick. I wore my derby, green plaid vest, and floppy tie. With Jason safely in the back seat, I punctuated my objections with sniffs. Abigail must have forgotten the condition in which she'd found me. Fresh from the Harpy's southern Virginia lair, I wasn't fit for man or woman. Of all people, Jason had never abandoned me, which shows you the loyalty and compassion of dogs.

"This village—are there going to be people there? When I was homeless, I became—uncomfortable around my own species. Jason will tell you. I intensely dislike other people, because—"

"Shush, Luray. Can't you just enjoy the beauty of the day? The shady canopy of the new spring leaves—they look like lime sherbet. A hundred shades of green in the oaks, maples, pines, and firs. The scrub growths—not weeds, my dear, but palettes of color and textures. And behold the glorious ferns! Flowers of every color line the woods and roads. There is peace to be found in all this, my husband."

I calmed a little. Sniffed again. The sunlight sparkled through an emerald lattice of the forest. The cloudless sky was robin's-egg blue, the spring breeze balmy after the long snowy winter. The world has beautiful spots, I thought.

"Life is worth living for the beauty alone," my spouse told me. "Now, are we feeling better?"

"All except for the nausea."

A half hour into the drive, I imagined how far away Belvedere was, and that if we could view ourselves from there, we'd be the tiniest dot in the distance, beyond the horizon, perilously close to the edge of the world.

"I need to find a place to pull over."

"Nonsense," she cooed, wrapping her gloved arm around mine. "We should be getting close."

She had this magic over me, Abby did. Her strength and confidence. Her love seemed to make all fear seep away.

"So, where is this place?" I finally asked. "We left civilization hours ago.

I don't know what I'll do if we get lost. I bet we're already lost."

"Luray Flitch, calm down. I want you to see this place. It'll be the model village for surviving the end of the world in style."

"If anyone can go out of existence in style, you can."

She squeezed my leg.

For another hour, we crested mountains and plunged into valleys, barely navigating the sharp, snaky turns. Abigail pulled out her copy of the Guide.

"The Guide says to find arable land away from industrial cities and make sure we have a source of clean water. We'll grow all our own food and be healthier."

"Hey I edited the book, remember?"

She lifted her chin. Through the veil of her touring hat she adjusted her gaze down the road. "Life was so much better in the nineteenth century. That's all I'm saying."

"Sure, all except for the Civil War, butcher dentists, economic collapses, and workhouses. They had slaves, cholera, and no anesthetics. And yellow journalism and political corruption. And no anti-trust laws."

"Kind of like today."

"Well right. But all I'm saying is it wasn't all so—*peachy* back then."

She cupped my chin in her hand and shivered theatrically to distract me.

"Last night was so lovely, Luray. The way you carried me inside, light as a feather—do keep that, Luray. It's so—*swashbuckler.*"

She pried a smile out of me, but it didn't dissuade me from my assault on this crazy idea.

"Abigail, you are a pathological romantic. We've done our job. We published the Guide and that's enough. Let people do whatever they're going to do."

"The Guide says the end will be terrible," she fretted. "A merging of prophecies from many lands—a slumgullion of human blunders set in motion long ago. The world religions mostly agree. Many will die, but some could survive. Permelia herself believed it, and someone has to show the people how."

Abigail read a passage like ammunition against me.

> "A century hence finds a world of metal, glass, and celluloid. A frightening world of spying eyes, camera boxes, and flickering windows. But this is not the end, only a portent of the end to come."

"Abby, this 'end' she wrote about might not come for decades. It might never come."

She read more from the Guide.

> "In the end, expect the unexpected. Deafened by heaven's torchlight, blinded in thunder, the remnant shall cower in isinglass."

"Yeah, but what the hell does that mean, anyway? No one knows."

There it was again. That obsessed shape to her eyes.

Permelia's visions were dour but not hopeless. She had envisioned "empty cities," better than destroyed, I supposed. The Guide only got specific with one city—Washington, D.C.— on fire. And emptiness. The book described fearful bodings for the capitals of the U.S. and the Middle East; a section on geographically safe lands in which to settle. It warned people away from the coasts. The book had a section on high-yield farming, and crafts, such as ceramics, knitting, and woodworking. And she talked of some diabolical alchemy that she didn't understand, but which she said would help bring it all about. A plot that began in ancient times.

♦ ♦ ♦

Abigail hooked a gloved thumb. "Hang a left, dear."

We turned onto a narrow macadam road which we quickly found blocked by a long, waist-high pike hinged to a post on one end. Just then, a strange creature shrouded in a cape and hood burst growling from the bushes. He struck a pugilistic stance as though daring the car to cross the line. We soon realized that it was a man.

"Well I'll be damned," I mused to Abigail, "Back when I was on all those pills, I used to see people like him all the time."

"Well, if it makes you feel any better, this time I see him, too."

The man's face was little more than a beard and beady eyes cowled in the folds of the hood. He loped over to my door, a tin cup quivering in his filthy hand.

"Pay now! You pay now!"

"What the hell…"

Jason barked, but I quieted him. The man threatened with his squinty eye.

"Me troll," he squawked. "Pay nickel toll. Ante up. Ante up."

"Do you have a name, sir?" Abigail asked, but the man went ballistic.

"Ayreeaaghhh!"

Abby shrunk back from his menacing snarl.

"Great," I complained, "a troll. A real one. You've delivered us into the bowels of a story book."

"Luray, could you shush for crying out loud?"

Abigail addressed the man directly. "Would you like to have a nickel, sir?"

The wretched man cackled, shoving his tin cup toward me.

I searched my pockets. "Can you break a twenty?"

Abby whacked my arm. She grinned wide, so as not to upset him.

"Luray, this is no time for jokes. Just give him the nickel, will you?"

"Here. Here."

I flipped a nickel into the air, and the man caught it in the can—*clink*—with a leap.

Abby consulted her map.

"Mr. Troll, is there some kind of old village around here someplace?"

He threw himself on the weighted end of the pike, raising it high in the air.

"Over the bridge," he sneered impatiently. "All is gone. The world is gone. The stupids will never know! You go now. Go! Go!"

I rolled my eyes at Abigail—*oh, please*—and she shot me a chastising look. I drove under the turnpike, and, in the mirror, saw the "troll" following us with his sinister eyes.

Abby inspected the woods in deep thought. "Luray, did anything about that seem strange to you?"

"Strange? What could be strange about a turnpike troll? Look—I have had it with this whole expedition. I'm sorry, but that was a bad omen. I'm turning around. Now."

"No you are not. Now you settle yourself. Did you hear him? He said 'the world is gone. All gone.' What did he mean by that?"

"Nothing. Because he's a certifiable screwball."

Abigail smiled prettily and patted my arm. "Be patient a little longer, my husband."

We crossed a river over a rickety wooden bridge and around the next turn found a cluster of forlorn shacks nestled in the loop of the river, all overgrown with kudzu and briars.

"Here it is, Luray. This is it."

"Here is what?"

"Park the car, will you? I think I'm in heaven."

"Abigail, this is no village. It's a ruin. A ghost town of crumbling shacks."

She sashayed down the rubble-strewn center of the street, strutting with her walking stick, and reveling in her own brand of triumph. As Jason conducted his own nose-to-the-ground investigation, I begrudgingly joined my wife. She had been wrong—I did not love the village when I saw it. Not at all.

"I've got news for you, honey. Like that troll guy said—the end of the world has already hit this place."

"I fail to see the humor," she lifted her proud chin. "Come. I want you to

take it all in. I see nothing but potential. Beaucoup potential. Luray—welcome to Dunkard Bottom."

"And such a pretty name. Dunkard Bottom. I didn't see it on the map."

"Of course not. It's abandoned. Isn't it simply beautiful?"

You could throw a rock from one end of the village to the other. The five crumbling buildings leaned this way and that. Roofs had fallen in and glassless windows gaped. We observed what used to be a general store and a smithy. Across the street were a two-story public house, a post office, and a four-room schoolhouse. Just down river from the bridge behind the public house was a decrepit old mill; the waterwheel canted off its bearings and rotting in the water. On the public house porch, my foot broke through a board. I peeked in the window.

"The whole floor is rotted out of this place, and the stairs are falling down," I commented. "You can't be serious."

"Think of it as yours, dear. As ours."

"And why would I want to do that?"

"Because. See. Honey, I kind of—already bought it."

"You *bought* it?"

I must have turned pale.

"Sit, Luray. Breathe, sweetie. Don't be upset." She giggled with pride. "I had to buy it. The village and twelve acres. Everything you see in the bend of the river. It's going to be our little Utopia."

"Abby—then what were we debating about?"

"I don't recall debating," she mused, then shook her head with determination. "The agent called yesterday and told me someone else was interested. I couldn't let it slip through my fingers. Besides, this is a quest. My personal quest to make Permelia Lyttle's vision a reality."

"You're as crazy as that troll guy—look, I hate ladders. I can't even hammer a nail straight."

But she wasn't listening.

"Oh, Luray! Will you just look at this adorable little post office!"

I was steaming as we looked over its two-rooms, which had shut down long before zip codes. A peeling sign over the door read:

Dunk rd Bottom
Virgini

Across the street, the two-story general store was smaller than the public house. The porch roof hung unsupported on one side. Along the river, east of the main street, was a small gray barn sided by a rail-fenced paddock. A dirt

lane led off behind the store, ran down a ways, and returned to the main street at the smithy and schoolhouse.

I tried to be gentle.

"Abigail, you're crazy. There is no amount of money in the western world that can fix this place. This is a huge mistake. Huge. Now, I'm sorry but I'm putting my foot down on this thing. When we get back, I want you to call the agent and get out of this deal. It shouldn't be a problem with that thirty-day rule thing or whatever."

"No, my sweet. I'm afraid it's much too late for that."

"Would you listen to your husband for once? You have to get your down payment back."

Abigail whipped out her cell phone and pressed a number on the speed dial.

"Hello, Mr. Sandidge? This is Abigail Flitch. We have arrived and we are ready. Let the work begin!"

"Huh?"

Within minutes, trucks began rolling into town from the south. Dozens of men emerged from the woods, many of them full-bearded men in identical denim coveralls, blue shirts, and straw hats, like they'd transported into our world from the nineteenth century. They carried wooden tool boxes, ladders, and lumber over their shoulders. The scene was surreal. The world must have already ended, like the troll said. Living isolated in the mountains like we did, we just never heard the news. Everything the Guide predicted had come about. It was over. We had already missed last call.

My vision tunneled. Prickly snow salted my vision. I telescoped inward toward unconsciousness. Jason barked his concern.

"Crimony, Abigail. What have you done?"

"Here, grab onto this fence post."

As I steadied myself, a team of horses pulled a wagonload of lumber over the bridge. A cascade of ladders slapped against the buildings and men were crawling over the roofs. Men were prying the rotten boards. But one man was clean–shaven. He held a plug of tobacco in his cheek and wore jeans, work-worn Tims, and a flannel shirt on his beefy frame. His ratty blond hair protruded from a scuffed red hard hat. He seemed to regard us with caution, but I think he was secretly envious of our outfits.

Jason sniffed him in as Abigail introduced us.

"Luray, this is Mr. Sandidge, the general contractor who's overseeing the work. Mr. Sandidge, this is my husband, Luray Flitch."

"Glad to know you."

"One hopes."

I staggered.

"Luray—are you going to be all right?"

"I doubt it. Seriously I do."

"Tch—"

Abigail surveyed her realm just bursting with the pride of yet another trophy. She spread her arms.

"Roofs that shed water, Mr. Sandidge. Walls that can withstand the winds and snows of winter. Insulated windows for efficiency. And level floors."

He spit. "I have my Class A master builder's license, ma'am, so I think I get the general idea."

"I *knew* you were the right choice," she bubbled. "The walls will be insulated with natural materials, Luray. And the roofs will have solar panels like Belvedere." She smiled with satisfaction. "And Mr. Sandidge, please keep the outside walls weathered like they are—it's so charming."

"It's your nickel, Mrs. Flitch."

"Are these your men?"

"Well, not really," Sandidge squinted. "I had a crew and subcontractors lined up. But when word got out about Dunkard Bottom comin' back, these Amishmen came out of the woods to ask if they could help. I guess their kin did business here a long time ago. They live over Eden Valley way."

I had one more question. "Why did they come through the woods instead of down the road?"

He tugged down his hard hat. "'Cuz of that damned fool with the turnpike. You have to pay him comin' and goin'."

"A lot of that going around these days," I submitted.

But he was right. When we left for home, the self-described troll made us pay again. Making change was an aggravating ordeal. I asked him if he had considered EZ Pass, but he only screeched and waved us on.

♦ ♦ ♦

I moped all the way home.

"I should be under a doctor's care." I held up my quivering hand. "I have a bad feeling about this. Look. Shaking, just like before."

"Then all the more reason for you to get away. I'm more convinced than ever that taking you to Dunkard Bottom was a great idea."

"Buying that broken-down excuse for a town was not a great idea." I stammered. "I—I just can't wait to get home."

"You still won't admit it, will you? Dunkard Bottom could be the best hope for those who survive what's coming. Think how proud you'll be. After the buildings are restored, we'll put up a website. People will come from all

over to see our little Utopia. Think of it as an extension of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide."*

Tact had never been one of my strong points.

"Abby, you are living in a dream world. I always thought it added to your charm, but now it's demolishing the apple cart of our life."

"The apple cart of our life?" She looked through her handbag. "I—think I must have some aspirins in here somewhere."

"Abby, you were brought up in an environment of—privilege. You were protected from life's frustrations. What makes you think you can create a model community single-handed? Besides, the Guide never refers to the community as Utopia—the word is never used."

"It would have to be something like Utopia," she said. "People will live out of their gardens again. Entertain each other with live music and play real games instead of computer games on the icky Internet." She shook a wasp out of her veil. "We already have builders hard at work—and you can't beat the Amish for speed and precision. Our village will have crafts like Colonial Williamsburg. And no politicians, either."

"Yeah, we'll see about that."

For having grown up in Williamsburg, she didn't know much about modern colonial tourism.

"Sweetie, for your information, the tradespersons in Williamsburg are specially trained and paid to be there," I told her politely. "At the end of the work day, they go home and watch TV. They go on the icky Internet. Listen to reason—we're safe at Belvedere. Besides, how will we manage the town from Belvedere? The stopped-up toilets alone would drive us nuts. Do you really want to be an absentee landlord?"

It was a reasonable question, but Abigail didn't answer it, just bunched her lips and soured into a whimpering cry.

"You are such a big phony, Luray Flitch." The tears flowed. "Where's the brave man I married?" she sniffed. "Where's the man who dodged bullets in order to bring *Permelia Lyttle's Guide* to the world?"

I felt ashamed. "Yeah, but—I hadn't seen Belvedere yet. I didn't know you yet."

She pouted, "Then, maybe I wasn't so good for you after all."

"That's not what I meant!"

"When you spoke to all those people in front of the White House your hands were steady as a rock."

I kept an even tone. "They wouldn't have been if I'd known you were going to go completely off the rails."

"Yes, my husband. But look who's going off the rails now."

When we pulled up in front of Belvedere, Abby regarded me squarely.

"Luray, please tell me you'll help me. Please. I can't do this without you."

I shuddered. Jason rested his chin on his paw.

"Don't worry, honey," she said. "Together, we're going to create a kinder gentler maze."

Jason barked once for yes. (Twice meant no.)

♦ ♦ ♦

Four weeks later we were working in the garden on a splendid spring day. Under the cerulean dome of the sky, the pine-sweet air felt room-temperature. The sun smiled on the young leaf vegetables, the lawn, and the shrubbery, and, as far as the eye could see, the newly greened mountain tops caressed the blue.

"Abigail, I like the ducklings gardening apron and hat, but you'd better put some clothes on underneath or you're going to get burned. You're back and—elsewhere."

"Oh, I'm all right. A little while longer, okay? Mmm—the sun feels so good."

The trees nodded politely in the breeze and, despite the beauty of the day, a nightmarish vision intruded from when we first published *Permelia Lyttle's Guide.* I just couldn't shake them. I could see the entire Blue Ridge forest blasted to charred black poles, whole towns exploding into dust, and people across the land incinerated in an apocalyptic fire. I wiped sweat from my temples. Sipped water.

While weeding the spinach, Abby's cell phone rang its *Afternoon of a Faun* ringtone. We couldn't find the phone at first, as it had fallen among the pea vines.

"Yes?" she answered. "Yes? Really? Oh, yes! Thank you, Mr. Sandidge. Oh, thank you."

After pocketing the phone in her apron pocket, she tried to suppress a thousand-watt smile.

"Abigail, I wish you would put your clothes on when you answer that damned cell phone."

"Luray, you are so ridiculous."

"Did you win the lottery or something?"

"No. It was Mr. Sandidge. He has great news. The work is on schedule and the apartment's ready."

I stood, mystified once again. "When you say apartment, exactly what do you mean by that?"

"Remember when you said we couldn't manage Dunkard Bottom as ab-

sentee landlords?"

I gawked like a big dope.

"Well, that was a big help, Luray. We can't manage it from here, but we can from there."

"There? You mean go live there? Us? Live *there?"*

As though I weren't already on the verge of hyperventilation, she continued.

"The apartment is above the general store," she prattled on in her dream world. "We'll live there while we supervise the construction. We'll invite the right people to come to make Dunkard Bottom hum again."

"What are 'the right people?'"

"People who—know things. People who can make things. Nice people. What are you waiting for, Luray? It's time to pack."

She was moving too fast for me, but that wasn't all. Whenever my wife shifted into high gear, she got downright managerial. A flare of determination lit her eyes, one whiplash of a brow crooked—she was going to build a post-apocalyptic community whether I helped or not.

Observing my resistance, she made puppy eyes and cupped my cheek. "Do you really want your one-and-only living all alone way out in the woods—with all those brawny plumbers and dashing young, uh, carp—"

"Well—no. No, of course not. I was being thoughtless."

She patted my head. "Good boy."

Running up the stairs, she called out, "Be a dear and fetch the suitcases from the attic."

I was out of options. "Can we pick up a skid of Xanax on the way?"

She laughed as though I were joking.

♦ ♦ ♦

The next morning, Abby descended the stairs in khaki slacks, a crisp plaid shirt, and brand-new Wolverines. She handed me some L.L. Bean jeans and work shirts—designer construction duds.

"For green community building," she decreed, "there's no reason why we can't blend in."

"Oh, we'll blend right in, we will."

I seriously doubted that my lily-white partner had ever done hard physical work in her life. We went outside, where I backed the Rolls out of the garage.

"That's the spirit, Luray. Come on. How hard can it be to start up a town?" Abigail cleaned her glasses excitedly on her shirt. "There are towns everywhere."

"Have you given any thought to how you're going to cultivate twelve

acres of land?"

"I've thought of everything," she beamed proudly. "I even bought a tractor."

"You bought a new tractor?"

"Well—a used one."

"Maybe we should stay here until the solstice, or something."

"Try to be positive, Luray."

With bleak resignation, I tried to look on the bright side.

"Okay, I guess. I wonder what it'll feel like to be a mayor."

"Oh, thank you, Luray. You're my rock." She hugged me, muttering a polite correction. "Except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"I'm going to be the mayor."

♦ ♦ ♦

We loaded the Rolls with suitcases, boxes of garden seeds, pots and pans, some radios, and as many books as we had room for, while also leaving space for Jason. My resourceful wife even brought boxes of food to get us through the construction phase. We checked the house to make sure everything was turned off. However, just as we were ready to lock the front door, a pair of white Volvo vans pulled up.

Two doctors in green scrubs emerged along with a nurse and some EMT people. Just seeing them brought me to the cusp of panic. I froze. Were they there for me? Had they found out about the naked dancing? Was it possible that I was actually an escaped inmate with amnesia?

"Good morning," said a balding, sandy-haired doctor with wire-rimmed glasses. "I'm Dr. Palmer and this is Dr. Campbell. We hope we can ask a favor."

"And what would that be?"

"We're volunteers with Rural Remote. We give free medical and dental services to folks who can't afford it. Anyway, our normal place west of here has been taken over by Agro-Technick for fracking, and the field east of us was padlocked for strip mining. We hoped we could set up in your yard to treat the local people for a day."

Abigail and I were always glad to help, but she seldom gave much thought to the consequences of favors, especially big ones.

"Of course you may," she grinned. "And what perfect timing. We're going away for an extended project to help the world. You're most welcome to use our place."

Their faces lit up. "You mean, we can set up in your yard? It would in-

volve a tent."

"No, silly. Use the whole house." She tossed him the keys. "Move on in and use the house. The rooms, the kitchen, everything."

I tried to smile. "But dear, it's our *house.* And we'll be coming *back.* So I don't think we should just hand over the—"

"Nonsense, Luray," she laughed. "We won't be needing this place for a good long while."

I clarified for my wife, "A few weeks on the outside."

But it was said and done. I gathered my courage. I laid an arm around Dr. Palmer's shoulder and walked him a few steps away.

"Doc, I have this condition. I get anxiety and panic attacks around people. Can you give me a prescription? Something that'll last a while?"

He seemed reluctant to do so without a few thousand dollars' worth of tests. Frowning, he reached into his van and fiddled a moment. He handed me a small envelope.

"Here are some samples."

"Samples?"

He shrugged politely. "You're not my patient, Mr. Flitch."

"Right. Well, I hope you enjoy this place—that we're *giving* you for *free."*

Abby poked me hard. "Luray!"

The doctors smiled at Abigail. "This is most generous, ma'am. Did you hear that everybody? We can use this beautiful place."

Before I could speak, Abigail had more words for the doctors.

"The house has its own well and sells power back to the electric company," she explained. As an afterthought to the doctor, she said, "Oh, and you can harvest the leaf veggies from the garden."

"Sure. Why would we need them?" I squirmed, but the medical team applauded us.

And why wouldn't they? We'd just handed them Belvedere.

"We're so very grateful," the doctor intoned. "I promise we'll take good care of the place."

As we drove away, my insides swirled down some type of existential drain. I dreaded the thought that we might never see Belvedere again. I dreaded being lost once again in the maze. Making sure Abigail was out of sight, I quickly downed one of miserly Dr. Palmer's pills. Would those doctors really take care of the house? Would they trim the lawn and bushes? Would they weed and harvest the garden? And what if Dunkard Bottom failed more quickly than I thought it would? Would they willingly give us back the keys? No lease was signed. No agreement—it was all just so *Abigail.*

As Belvedere disappeared in the rear view mirrors, my wife busily re-

viewed her many lists. She made calls on her cell phone as I dreaded what appeared to be our penultimate swan dive into the abyss.

Three

"What Dost Thou Mean, Free?"

WITH LITTLE MORE THAN ABIGAIL'S OPTIMISM and a spare million bucks, we had bought a tumbledown hamlet in a remote mountain hollow and engaged a contractor and some generous Amish neighbors to rebuild it. Moreover, Abigail had handed Belvedere to the doctors-without-offices as we set off to take up residence in said hamlet. Thus we left behind our idyllic home and plunged headlong into bucolic exile. Abigail relieved the tedium of the drive by recounting the town's history.

Dunkard Bottom began as a trading post in a clearing in Virginia Indian country. It became a stagecoach depot and watering stop for settlers heading west during the bumper-to-bumper Conestoga rush hour. Twenty years later, it was a notorious backwoods brothel, complete with a saloon, gunfights, and a one-legged Scotch-Irish madam. It then sat empty for many years. Someone turned the old brothel into a general store and added the boarding house and smithy. In the mid-1800s, regional farmers took it over, building the mill and school. However, after the Civil War, the village became brunch for termites. The last permanent occupant left after the crash of '29, and once the interstate highway was built twenty miles west of there, even fewer came. The most recent seller was a computer analyst and failed weekend farmer from Bethesda, Maryland, who had bitten off more than he could ruminate. The kudzu and raccoons were happy to retake possession.

Abigail extolled the thoroughness of her preparation with *I'm good* and *I'm so-o-o good*—it warmed me a bit. I loved her dedication and unshakable faith in her ideas. However, I kept close to the vest my expectation that while we might do honor to Permelia Lyttle in the trying, we'd be limping back to Belvedere long before anything resembling the end of the world passed its first whiff of brimstone.

And what of the end of the world? I couldn't entirely dismiss the apparent converging of prophecies that could begin at any time. Abby had laid it out for me in the world's wisdom lit, but people throughout history have guessed theirs was the time of the end, the Black Plague and the proliferation of fast food chief among them.

After the 2000 Coup, a general feeling of foreboding had descended on the nation. But that feeling got specific during my and Abigail's cross-country promotion of the Guide. With the end of the world at our doorstep, the books and movies alone had turned Doomsday into a growth industry. What would actually transpire was anybody's guess, but a lot of wagers were being placed online for various outcomes. In Las Vegas, High rollers filled rooms in front of giant TVs, fixing their eyes on the minute-by-minute action—webcams focused on Big Ben, the Taj Mahal, the Great Pyramid, and such—just in case of an apocalyptic shake-up. Hedge funds had been set up so profits could be made even after all of human civilization had destroyed itself. As for me, I would work as hard as I could to help Abigail make Dunkard Bottom what she wanted it to be. So much the sooner that we could go back home.

When our collective time was up, what would the end look like? Would the earth combust, heaving the faithful up into the arms of the Lord? Would those who believed in a heavenly reward find themselves clothed in white robes living on a new earth with premium, paradise-like upgrades? Or would they ooze about in some incorporeal swamp of low regret, or leap around in fits of lofty bliss? In fact, without comprehension, had the ancient visionaries and prophets intuitively visualized some future nuclear pyre? It wasn't likely that someone would push the buttons—a nuclear war would be bad for business on anyone's ledger. No, the nukes wouldn't make sense because of business. It's more likely a religious group would make use of nukes. Then what? Would every last person on the planet perish, or just many, or most? Would it be the end of life itself or merely the end of life as we know it? Abigail was correct that the prophets hadn't specifically ruled out survivors.

I supposed Dunkard Bottom was Abigail's own hedge against pessimism, and I had to admit that driving into the nearly finished village revealed a stunning sight. The once derelict old shacks now stood straight and sported new cedar roofs and modern double insulated windows. I was impressed with Mr. Sandidge's work and how neat the little village looked.

Abigail, Jason, and I settled into our two-bedroom apartment above the store with its living room/dining area and not much of a kitchen. She explained that the villagers would dine communally across the street in the public house, which had a fairly complete commercial kitchen in back. The dining room would be warmed by the wide gray-stone fireplace. It wasn't Belvedere, but it was comfortable. I could call it home for a while and hope that nobody actually showed up.

♦ ♦ ♦

Unfortunately, the apartment's wide windows afforded Abigail a binocu-

lar view of every board nailed and every door hung. She'd sit in her chair, fretting with alarm.

"No—not *that* way!" or "Be careful!"

She'd periodically run outside to consult with Mr. Sandidge about this or that.

One day I gently slipped the binoculars from her hands.

"Abby, maybe you ought to just let the workers do their work. Let's make plans of another kind. Like—how are you going to attract the 'right' people to come live here? Run an ad in the paper? 'Citizens wanted: no experience necessary'? And what kind of local government are we going to have? A town doesn't just run itself, you know."

"Luray, you always over-think everything."

"Oh really?"

"Let's go inspect the post office."

Abigail rode Mr. Sandidge pretty hard, partly because she didn't know the difference between such concepts as plumb, square, and level. However, she was very sure about traffic flow, feng shui, and preserving the historical feel. Mr. Sandidge winced whenever he saw her coming.

"Shit fire, ma'am, it's a damn bearing wall—you can't remove it without a hellacious long beam runnin' through the house—pardon my French."

"Please, just make my dream come true, Mr. Sandidge. Is that too much to ask?" She grimaced, lifting her pretty chin and flipping her hand. "I want an open floor plan here. Just make sure you maintain the period accuracy." He'd slap his gloves to the floor and sob against the wall.

"And Mr. Sandidge," she continued, "vulgarities accost the ear, so please—suppose we tidy up our speech. Hmm?"

He fleered. His pleading eyes looked to me for support.

"It's true," I was able to tell him. "She doesn't like vulgarities."

A short time later, a matter of some urgency arose over at the mill. The dark brown siding of the building contrasted with the naked white sycamore trunks, all bathed in the light of the orange sunset glistening off the river.

The Amish foreman approached Abigail and me. Amos Vogt's light blue eyes pierced without humor, and his beard jutted off his chin like brush protruding from a cart.

"Yes Mr. Vogt?"

"We require the assistance of Mr. Sandidge as we presently intend to lift the wheel axle onto its new bearings."

"How exciting, Luray!" Abigail clapped. "They're mounting the waterwheel!"

Just then, a portly and dimpled man in white coveralls joined us, a heavy

white bag on his shoulder. Even his shoes were white.

"You folks startin' on the mill today?"

"We be," replied Mr. Vogt.

"Well, I'm the miller. We spoke?"

"Thou hath spoke with Mr. Sandidge, who just a short spell ago pitched himself into the river."

I asked, "So you're a miller?"

"That's right," the man dithered, his thick lips straining into a smile. "I wanted to supervise the setting of the wheel. The gears and millstones."

Abigail seized control. "And what is your name, if I may ask?"

"Miller."

"Mr.—Miller," Abigail repeated in disbelief. "Thank you, but we have no need of a miller just yet."

Whenever Miller spoke, he tilted his fleshy pink face backward and squeezed his eyes into inscrutable slits.

"All due respect, ma'am, Sandidge requested my supervision." He doffed his hat. "He told me that I would be the miller here."

"Well, Mr. Sandidge had no right to tell you that," Abigail complained indignantly. "Mr. Sandidge is not in charge here. I am."

Work proceeded with the wheel, and, despite Abby's protests, it looked like we would have a miller—it had been one of the recommendations in *Permelia Lyttle's Guide*—mill your own grain. However, I didn't like the synchronicity of this man's presence or his name. People had begun to arrive. I was ready to pitch myself into the river, too.

Just then, Sandidge appeared, dripping wet and anxious to explain.

"Mrs. Flitch, Mr. Miller's the only miller within a hundred miles. And you need a miller, and we need his expertise to set the drive train right on this here mill. It seemed like a fair exchange."

"What do you expect in the way of compensation?"

Mr. Miller brightened. "A small salary and a share of the flour ought to do it. The mill only operates when there's grain to grind. We'll probably shut down in winter."

Abigail puffed and steamed. Folded her arms and bumped out a defiant hip. She stepped this way. She stepped that way.

"All right. You are our miller."

She turned toward the Amish men.

"But you really ought to take a lesson from Mr. Vogt. He and his people are gracious enough to contribute their work—for free."

"Free?" Vogt bristled, and the other straw-hatted men winced. "What dost thou mean—free? We are rebuilding thine hamlet, English; replumbing thine

schoolhouse, and refurbishing thine mill in exchange for mill time—to grind our corn, barley, and wheat. We Amish and everyone—all the farms hereabout—haven't had a mill close by in many a year. For this, we shall pay thee a royalty in flour and meal and other goods."

"Oh," she said. "I didn't realize that. Well, put it that way, and I suppose that sounds fair. The village will have a supply of bread."

"And cornbread," added Mr. Schmid. "And millet and oats."

"That's great, Abigail," I reassured her. "Everybody who has grain to grind will bring it here to grind it."

"Well then," my bride smiled stiffly. "Suppose we let these men get back to work. And Mr. Sandidge, taking a swim on my time—isn't appreciated."

But Abigail couldn't just walk away.

"I want to watch."

Mr. Vogt exhaled wearily. "If thou must. But best keep your distance, ma'am, for this would not qualify as woman's work."

That's all Abigail needed to hear. She watched over their shoulders, checked the bubbles on their levels, and inspected the rigging and the small crane they'd brought in. Little by little, they lifted the heavy wheel and axle onto its new bearings. The men admired their work amid the sound of general approbation. The tedious work of repairing the paddles on the waterwheel would begin immediately.

After a while, Abigail just couldn't stand it anymore. She took the hammer right out of a carpenter's hand.

"No, no. Like this."

Whack, whack, *thud.*

Yes, she had hit her thumb squarely and with the force of anger behind it. She had squashed that distal phalange without mercy, and flattened it shingle-thin.

Smiles were squelched. Guffaws suppressed.

Abigail's first expression was one of disbelief. She had never experienced that degree of pain in her life. Profound agony shot through her nervous system. Moreover, her thumbnail turned black with blood. She then released a complex series of invectives that made the Amish turn away as from the devil and set Mr. Sandidge to laughing his ass off.

"Abigail," I offered. "Suppose you let me take you home and put some ice on that."

Back at the apartment, she sobbed like a child-with-a-boo-boo all afternoon, holding her thumb up and staring at it in distress.

"Luray, it's—thumping."

Jason hopped onto the bed and rested his chin empathetically on her knee.

"Luray," she blubbered. "Nothing's going the way I want."

"Of course it is. You're trying too hard. I mean, it all looks great to me. These men really know what they're doing."

I held her in my arms.

She sniffed, "You know a lot about smashed thumbs don't you."

"Sure—all baby boys are born with this knowledge. It's God's gift, so they get used to it."

"I've never heard of that before."

"Swedish anthropologists have pretty much confirmed it."

That was the last time Abigail interfered with the construction. A day or so later, Mr. Sandidge moved up the completion date by two weeks.

♦♦♦

While Abigail rested, I wanted to catch up on the latest news. I rigged a quick antenna and plugged in Abby's shortwave. The cyber war had escalated after the G8 had each figured out that they'd been hacking each other while pretending to be each other. The net result of this was that they were hacking themselves and didn't like what they saw. There was no longer any culpability. No way to identify who was being the worst prick, and this left all the cyber security departments scratching their heads. We were all the enemy, and we couldn't be trusted.

"No one knows who is winning the cyber war," chuckled a deep-voiced African BBC announcer. "The Internet has turned the entire globe into Awfrica. Welcome to our world, Bwana!"

The Second Recession had set the world's economies back to their 2009 levels once again so the banksters could finish indebting the straggler countries they hadn't yet picked up. Every country on earth was now heavily in debt forever.

"But it is not without hope, says Sofri Bandal of the U.N.," the announcer continued.

Bandal confirmed, "It is true. We have hope that the Pan-Awfrican war will out-sell the Levantine war two-to-one. This will be great for Awfrica's collective economies."

"Thank you Mr. Bandal." The announcer rushed Bandal off the air.

"In breaking news, China has called in the U.S. debt—good luck with that—and the Nobel Prize in chemistry has gone to a U.S. scientist who developed a supplement for the nutrition missing in GMO wheat and corn. A big plus, that. And the hackers who raided MI5 have apparently sold a mountain of data for an undisclosed sum to a novelist in Manchester.

"Meanwhile, the U.S. propaganda industry announced that it has sewn up

next year's election results months ahead of schedule."

I could scarcely remember a time when the news didn't sound like a series of jokes. Shaking my head, I switched off the radio.

"I can't listen to any more of it," I griped. "The system's imploding. We have no idea what's really going on. We don't even know who's really in charge."

"You're right about one thing, Luray," Abby whimpered, holding up her fat bandaged thumb.

"Really?"

"I was a privileged child, growing up. Over protected. But I'm going to tough it out from now on like they did in the old days. You'll see. You're going to be proud of me."

I kissed her. "I'm already proud of you, Abby."

We went downstairs into the store, which had been nicely fitted with a counter and shelves for notions and sundries, she said, though I didn't know exactly what those were.

"Come on," I said. "Let's take a walk."

Abigail, Jason, and I ambled down the hard-pack lane that ran between the store and the barn, and we heard a lot of noise back there. Someone was chopping away the kudzu and pulling out the brambles and bushes. Children. Four children were working back there, two Amish boys in denim coveralls and straw hats and two girls in long blue dresses and white caps on their heads. They greeted us respectfully as they cleared a large open space behind the store.

"This will be a common area," Abigail mused. "We could have town meetings here when the weather's nice."

Suddenly, Jason froze. His ears stood. I thought I heard some kind of humming. The strange tones were coming from across the narrow lane in a grassy orchard of apple and pear trees. Suddenly, out of the tall grass the oddest creature poked its head—something from the Himalayas or the Andes or another planet.

"What the heck is that?"

Jason barked. We heard more humming. More voices. Abigail was perplexed at first. The creature was shaggy with long thick reddish hair, his head big with fur, and wearing a camel's grin.

"Luray, that's an alpaca."

"An alpaca?" I turned on my country accent. "Somehow, that just don't seem Vuh-ginia to me."

"Well that's what he is, and boy does he need a trim."

Just then two more funny faces popped up above the grass. And two more.

There were five in all. Jason lowered his head and began to creep toward them. I gave him a herding command.

"Lie down, Jase. Lie down."

"How do you suppose they got here?" Abigail wondered.

"Young man," I said to the Amish boy. "What's your name?"

"I'm Jonathan Schmid, sir. This is my brother David and my sisters Rebecca and Sarah."

"What about those alpacas, then? Do you know what they're doing here?"

"Eating, sir."

"No, I mean, whose are they?"

"They once belonged to the family of English who owned this place before," the boy giggled mischievously. "They came from the city to try farming on weekends, but they thought farm work too difficult, I think."

"They thought farming too difficult," little Rebecca grinned. "They lost their money gambling in the markets and abandoned their animals to fend for themselves. We've been minding them."

"Becky, it is wrong to gossip," scolded the boy, adding, "they stacked hay in the barn over the winter for them. But I believe the creatures belong to Dunkard Bottom now, sir. I believe they belong to thee."

"Well I'll be damned—sorry."

Abigail mused, "At least now I know what 'camelids convey' meant in the sales agreement. Now all we have to do is find someone who spins and weaves. We'll make things out of the fleece and sell them in the store."

Prodded by ancient instincts generally possessed by herding dogs, Jason went into action. He approached the herd and quickly hunched down.

"Steady, Jase."

Abigail expressed her concern. "He isn't going to attack them is he?"

"Those aren't sheep, Jason," I informed him. "But if you can manage them, then it looks like you'll have a job here."

Jason wagged his appreciation, tiptoed toward them, and gently introduced himself from a safe distance. They didn't run, but seemed to regard him with caution. He took his time. As we watched, it became apparent that Jason and the alpacas would achieve mutual respect.

The children had opened up the entire area behind the store, and we were better able to see the shaggy cedars, tall pines, and spreading oaks that made what Abigail called a "charming scene." Abby and I walked further down the lane beneath some overhanging weeping willow trees. Where the U-shaped lane turned back toward Main Street, we were surprised to find an old cemetery there that had been revealed by the children's brush clearing.

"English and German," Abigail remarked. "There's history here—I love

this."

Grave markers bore dates going back to the eighteenth century. The lettering was worn down to barely legible markings on the oldest stones. Elmer Artemus Dunkard and his wife Mimsy Miles Dunkard were buried there along with their six children, some quite young when they died.

"Louise Miles Dunkard," she lamented softly. "Born September and died November the same year. She was just a baby."

We saw the graves of many babies.

It was an opportunity to employ irony. "There's your nineteenth-century Utopia."

Other stones bore the name Dunkard, along with Kolb, McAferty, Stiffler, and, of course, Smith.

Abigail and I crossed the lane and climbed up the hill, where we came upon a panoramic view of the village. The six new roofs alone gave the hamlet a feeling of renewal and unity. Mr. Sandidge had drilled a well, and once the other work was done, the solar panels would be installed. The village would soon be "open"—but for what?

I said, "I wonder if anybody will actually come here."

"Do you mean you hope they don't? Well, don't worry, Luray, they'll come," she lectured. "I just hope we get good people. Skilled people."

Below us and to the right of the store were the barn and paddock.

Abigail observed, "I see a spot for the vegetable garden—there, behind the store where the sun will find it."

Abigail backed into my arms, where I held her for a long while.

We observed Main Street as it continued south to Charlottesville and Richmond. To the north, where the troll dwelt, the road split into two, one toward West Virginia and the other east toward Washington, D.C.

The sleepy river hugged Dunkard Bottom in a tight loop, sweeping close where it drove the splashing waterwheel. From there, it curved around a bend and out of sight, lost for a distance in dense bank growth, trees, and the farm patches of what the locals called Eden Valley.

"Thank you, Luray."

"For what?"

"For supporting me here. You're a kind and patient man. I couldn't do this without you."

Considering that I had hoped Dunkard Bottom would fall flat, I felt a little guilty. But I couldn't shake the doubt that anyone would want to live in the middle of nowhere all for the privilege of hard physical work.

Abigail took my hand and tugged. We walked out behind the barn where a deer path led through a fern grove to the river's edge. We followed it to a

cool shaded glade by a rocky place where the murmur of the water quieted the hammering into distant bumps. We found ourselves quite alone under the verdant canopy of the trees.

Abigail removed her glasses and lay back on a flat mossy place.

"It is so beautiful here." She reached out her arms. "Come, Luray. Lie down with me a while."

The moss around her head matched the green of her eyes. In her arms, I knew the answer as to why I'd come and the reason why I would survive leaving Belvedere. I had moved with Abigail to Belvedere because I loved her. I'd come to Dunkard Bottom for the same reason.

Helplessly holding up her bandaged thumb, she asked for help opening the buttons of her shirt, and we made love in the open air, in the cool shadows of the trees, mere inches from the gossiping water.

Four

The Lyceum

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF DUNKARD BOTTOM finished in mid-spring. Auxiliary electrical power ran from a line a half mile down the road, the cables having been buried underground, but the solar panels were already generating electricity of their own. If the county power grid failed, we'd still have all the power we needed. If the solar panels failed, each building had its own battery backup. We also bought a portable generator for emergencies. Each building had its own septic system. The trades inspectors had given the work a thumbs-up. All that remained was our final inspection.

The Messers Sandidge, Vogt, and Schmid led us from building to building, their chests proud. Each building had a potbelly stove for winter. In the store were some empty glass-front cases to display our wares, should we ever have any. Next door stood the old smithy with its forge and anvil and a heap of glistening chestnut coal. Across the street was the schoolhouse, which had a large classroom, an office, and upper classrooms that had been turned into living spaces. The post office was no longer under a charter with the postal system, but it glimmered inside with its brass cage and pigeonhole boxes bright and gleaming. In the back were a desk, a safe, and space for a small bed and table. The public house had a dining room with old tables and mismatched chairs, and a pass-through window from the kitchen. Upstairs were four efficiency apartments each with a small wood-burning stove.

The mill, however, impressed us the most. By way of levers and gears, the water wheel rotated a vertical shaft that turned a series of grinding stones on three levels. Mr. Miller was on hand to explain how it worked over the *creak-crawk* of the machinery, which were engaged and disengaged by way of levers. The grain was conveyed to the top floor by a wheel-driven conveyor and fed into the top grinding stones. There, the hulls and chaff were freed from the kernels of the grain and blown by belt-driven fans into catchers at the sides. The partially ground grain fell to the second story, where it was ground further, and to the first floor, where it was either bagged as meal or ground further into fine flour.

Abigail extended a kindness to the miller.

"Mr. Miller, as our official miller, would you care to take one of the apartments?"

He winced. He squinted. "Me? Naw, thank you, ma'am," he declined with a twitch. "I have a house—over yonder."

Mr. Vogt mentioned that he had oats to mill.

"Bring your grain along anytime, Mr. Vogt—all of you," grinned Abigail. "We're ready if Mr. Miller's ready."

Vogt tipped his hat and clumped down the stairs. I noticed him through the window, crossing the bridge and hiking toward Eden Valley with his blueshirt brethren.

Mr. Sandidge handed me a ring of keys to all the buildings and it was understood that Mr. Miller would have his own set of keys for the mill. Abigail then handed Mr. Sandidge a check—the zeroes on which made me flee my body and observe from above.

As Sandidge drove away, however, a red stake-body truck pulled up carrying something under a tarp. On board were Mr. Brown, the engineer who had restored Abigail's Rolls, and his son Tyrone, a talented artist who leaned out the truck window and asked Abigail where she wanted "it."

I asked what they'd brought.

Abigail said, "It's a surprise."

The father-son engineering team backed the truck behind the store to the common area, in the center of which Mr. Sandidge had poured a low concrete pedestal. The men pulled off the tarp, revealing the prismed armillary from Abigail's backyard. As they installed it, I felt more at home.

Abigail asked, "Are the doctors still at my house?"

Mr. Brown described long daily lines of people down the road and up the driveway.

"It's hard to watch, Miz Abby, I can tell you that," Mr. Brown told her. "There's a lot of need. A lot of it. And people are scared and confused."

Abigail got an idea. "Mr. Brown, Tyrone, why don't you join us here? You could take rooms and help us make Dunkard Bottom efficient."

Mr. Brown rubbed his wooly gray whiskers.

"Sure," flushed Tyrone, who always seemed to take a shine to my wife. "I'd love the change, and to tell you the truth—."

Mr. Brown cleared his throat. "Now, I can see that you've done a fine job already, Miss Abigail. But—we have our business. We're painting a boat. A van–" he glowered at his son. "Our home and everything is back there."

"Things could get bad," I offered.

Mr. Brown squinted at the sky. "It would have to get pretty bad for us to leave home. Right, Tyrone?"

The young man pouted. "Yessir, Mastah Daddy."

"I believe I am about to smite you, son…"

"Sorry, Pop."

After they left, Abigail and I admired the way the armillary's prism rolled its brilliant spectra randomly around the village, guided by the tillerman of the wind.

Abigail herself sparkled with pride.

"I think we should give this spot a name. I know—we shall call it the Lyceum."

And so we did.

♦ ♦ ♦

That very afternoon we got to work laying out our vegetable garden. We found tools in the barn, some of which dated back to the 1920s. The used tractor Abigail had bought was parked in there, too, but it was older than I was. It came with hay forks and bucket attachments. However, the other equipment was antiquated, including a gang plow, a disc harrow, and a rickety planter. I tried the tractor key, but all it produced was a lurch.

"You men can fix it," Abby waved her hands. "Men can fix anything."

"Yeah, but honey, I don't know a spark plug from a chocolate éclair."

She cupped my cheek and squinted.

We grabbed shovels and commenced breaking ground in what would be the village vegetable garden. In the digging, I found a little street sign covered with dirt. I read it aloud.

"Needful Lane."

"How quaint," she giggled. "I think I'll walk here whenever I'm feeling—needful."

I brushed off the sign and stuck it on a fence post where the lane joined Main Street. We worked a while, and Abigail stopped to wipe sweat from her face. I liked her sweaty. It reminded me of more carefree midnight dances at Belvedere.

"People will come," she reassured herself. "They will, Luray. I can feel it."

We stripped down to our shorts, tee-shirts, and straw hats and turned over the soil. We pounded stakes and ran strings. We labored for sevral hours before we were interrupted by a familiar woolen voice.

"Pilgrim—that you?"

I looked into the furrowed countenance and gray beard of the homeless man I'd met at the Gooseneck Library.

"Hermes?"

"Hermes Dill—at your service."

Hermes was the self-educated philosopher and man-about-town who had helped me solve the riddles in *Permelia's Guide to the End of the World.* He wore coveralls and a frayed khaki ball cap over his ratty gray hair. He didn't look a day over seventy.

"Abby, Hermes knows a lot about the end of the world. He's the man who showed me the value of the Guide."

"It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Dill."

She held out her hand, but he didn't know what to do with it besides pump it vigorously.

"Ma'am."

I pointed out, "You're a long way from Gooseneck."

"I wintered down in Spartanburg, Pilgrim. I was hitchin' the scenic route up for D.C. tourist season." He lifted his craggy eyes in thought. "But in specific, I got a lift from a family of nouveau homeless. Said they had relatives hereabouts. Told me someone was restorin' ole Dunkard Bottom, and I'm bound to say you've done a mighty fine job."

Abigail beamed. "We hope to attract a community here."

I jumped in. "Truth is, we need someone to help us plant our crops."

"Well, farming I know," said Hermes, scratching deep into his beard. "I was a farmer back in Athens, Georgia, years ago. Also, I got nowhere to live. That's pretty much my resume."

Abigail straightened. "Then it is providence that brings you here, Mr. Dill." Her eyes calculated. "Text-book serendipity at work. Do you remember how farming's done?"

"Ain't nuthin' to it but a little know-how, some common sense, and a lot of work."

Waiting for a response, he poked at a tooth with his tongue. I put my arm around his shoulder.

"Hermes, suppose you let me to introduce you to a tractor friend of mine."

I walked him to the barn where I showed him the tractor and other equipment.

"Can you work with these?"

"Heh," he grimaced. "Hm. Just how much farmin' are you planning to do?"

I told him Abby wanted to cultivate about nine acres and raise enough food to sustain maybe twenty people or so.

He reached over and clunked the gear shift into neutral. The engine turned over, though it still wouldn't start. I felt pretty stupid for having left it in gear.

"You need good equipment even for nine acres. Maybe this other stuff can

be fixed." He kicked the planter and yanked mightily on one of the moving parts, which didn't move. "I don't know about this old planter."

"I'll talk to Abigail," I reassured him. "She can buy us one."

We returned to the garden where Abigail was raking. I told her that Hermes wanted to be our farmer, but that we needed to buy a new corn planter.

"A planter? Sure. I'd buy one in a minute—the best," she said sincerely. "Except—"

"Except what?"

"Except I'm broke."

I stared stupidly, trying to parse what I had surely misheard.

"What do you mean you're broke?"

"Broke," she sighed with inexplicable satisfaction. She propped her elbow on the rake handle with a smile. "That check I gave Mr. Sandidge? That was the last cash I had. My stocks and dividends dried up like everybody else's—how all that could go wrong while they're telling us it's all right, I'll never know."

The blood drained from my head. I must have teetered.

Hermes caught me by the arm. "You all right Pilgrim?"

I inquired of my wife. "You mean you have no cash at all?"

She smiled innocently. "No, my dear—all I have to my name now is Belvedere, the Silver Ghost, this little village—and thou." She kissed my cheek. "But isn't it liberating? Don't you feel inspired to find yourself with no money at all?"

I explained as gently as I knew how. "To anyone who has nothing, I don't think that would qualify as particularly liberating or inspiring."

"You said it, brother," added Hermes politely. "But one thing's for sure, Miz Flitch. Ten minutes ago you and me had nothin' in common. Now? Everything."

They chuckled together, but neither had noticed that I wasn't laughing. We would now be entirely dependent upon the village to live. On the plus side, we had a miller and a farmer in a hamlet that shouldn't even exist, but we needed much more than that. At least I knew Hermes. You could count on him to tell you the truth.

Abby asked, "Would you mind taking one of the rooms in the public house, Mr. Dill?"

He grinned as though he'd won the lottery. "Ma'am, I wouldn't mind taking a room anywhere."

Just then, Jason appeared on the grassy hill. He bounded over to greet his old friend Hermes with a tail-wagging hello that had Hermes grinning.

"Jason boy. How the hell are ya?"

But then the alpacas strode into view.

Hermes asked. "Say, what manner of fancy goats you raisin' here?"

"Those are alpacas," I told him. "They came with the place."

My wife smiled. "From them, we shall obtain fine fleece."

Abby was so pleased with herself: she would have yarn for products and a farmer to farm.

Hermes glanced back toward the barn.

"Maybe I'll tinker with that old tractor awhile." He squinted at the gleaming sun. "You'll want to plant soon. It's already too late for the cold crops."

But our cold crops had come in. It's just that they were at Belvedere.

Later that evening, Abigail sat at the table pouring over her lists and chewing the ends of her hair. She seemed blissfully unaware of how the dynamics of our lives had just changed.

"If we're broke, we have to go back home, Abby," I urged. "We can't start up a village without money."

"Luray, will you quit worrying? Tsk—you just worry too much."

"But what about supplies? Food? If anyone actually comes, we'd have nothing to feed them. It'll be months before we can eat anything out of the garden."

But she wasn't listening. "We'll plant the corn here. And a patch of squash over there."

I hugged her and kissed the top of her head and smelled the familiar essence of her. I also sensed the beginning of the end for the crazy, impractical pipe dream of Dunkard Bottom. Because we were now broke, I was feeling better about the whole thing. The village wouldn't make a dime. We'd be home within a few weeks, tops.

♦ ♦ ♦

When things started to go right, they started to go wrong. CNN sent a producer, a heavily tatooed cameraman, and a dimply blonde to film the village and interview us. Abigail didn't notice the reporter's cynicism. The cameraman panned us slowly up and down for our duds—couture porn Abigail called it—as the reporter snarked, "It's Halloween every day here in Dunkard Bottom."

By the time the story aired, it was dubbed "Resuscitating Dunkard Bottom." It told of how the "ditsy doomsday duo," aka us, had published the über-paranoid *Permelia Lyttle's Guide,* re-opened a colonial brothel, and kept a troll at the "south entrance" to collect nickels. They got that wrong, however, as the troll was collecting nickels at the north entrance.

In addition to irritating me to the point of hives, the story sent us a slew

of curiosity seekers. I took another of Dr. Palmer's pills, wondering why I hadn't also asked him for panic-attack medicine and something for what I was sure would develop into vertigo. We were actually attracting tourists, but they weren't what we expected. Not the old men in new white sneakers, sunglasses, and baseball caps. No. The first rubberneckers were Washington sub-bureaucrats wanting to have a look around and use the bathrooms. They came in Escalades and Town Cars. We were also seeing middle class refugees who were leaving the cities in search of cheap real estate.

Trodding our streets in their J. Crew finest, they walked the lanes of Dunkard Bottom, their noses in their cellphones, disappointed that we weren't wearing Merlin caps and carrying magic wands. They also expected doormen, hostesses, and a gift shop, all disappointingly absent. I was nearly blinded by a selfie-stick, and I kept a broom handy to swat the occasional hobby drones buzzing overhead taking movies of us.

CNN's laugh about the nickels gave Abigail an idea.

"Luray! Why not charge visitors five cents for everything: tours, snacks, and even the restrooms?"

"Abby, that maybe not be your best idea. This place will cost more in taxes than we can take in. In case you don't know what broke means—you're broke, remember?"

"It's five times what we charged for the Guide," she countered. "Think of the nickel fare as 500 percent economic growth."

"But we aren't sustainable. Not self-sufficient. You're going to know that in a few weeks when you try to buy food or pay the bills."

Abigail had gone too far. If Dunkard Bottom tanked, she would have to borrow to keep it going. We'd be plunged into debt. My ex-millionaire wife proved once again how naïve she was about money. I decided I'd better keep a closer eye on her.

In the meantime, I was pressed to get more deeply involved in the day-to-day operations of the village, and I admit that the tourist business was growing. For tourist duty, I donned a derby and smart Edwardian suit that Abigail had brought along that included a jacket, vest, and striped trousers. Thusly attired, I conducted tours of the buildings, while collecting a nickel a head.

Reactions varied.

"Hell's bells this is cheap entertainment," one man whistled. "And we only had to pay a nickel to come across the river. That fellow you got out there really needs some help with his manners, though."

Children made faces. "He's scary."

♦ ♦ ♦

One day, a red-haired English woman arrived in a beat-up old green VW Westphalia. She introduced herself as Tillie Gaston, a weaver, saying she had just earned her MFA in textiles from RISD.

"A weaver?" I repeated darkly, hoping Abigail hadn't heard. "How nice for you. Say—after you look around, you can head back home one of two ways—"

"—you don't understand," protested Tillie. "I've come here because I believe in what you are doing."

"You do?"

"I want to join you."

Abigail was suddenly the woman's best friend.

"A weaver? Just in time. Why don't you let me introduce you to a fine bunch of alpacas who desperately need a haircut."

"I know alpaca fiber," the woman said, her drawn, impish face not without charm. "I worked with alpaca when I interned in Peru."

"Do you also spin?"

"Supply me enough of it, and I could make fine weaving yarns out of your native kudzu," she stated in a crisp accent. "Those alpacas and I shall become good friends." She grinned and warmly took our hands. "There is one thing—"

"What?"

"I hoped I might live in your progressive community. You wouldn't by chance have a room to let?"

I held up an index finger. "Sorry. Full up—"

"—Yes, yes, yes," interrupted Abigail. "Of course you'll stay here. That was established as soon as you said weaver."

Abigail assigned her the efficiency across from our apartment above the store. The woman excitedly sprinted to her bus and prepared to move her equipment inside.

I mumbled, "Jason will give you the five-cent tour."

Abigail elbowed me in the ribs. "Cooperate, Luray."

Still, I had to marvel at this run of what Abigail called serendipity—she had a miller, a farmer, and now a resident weaver. Abby spoke of opening a café in the public house and of filling the store with wares to sell.

The dressy tourists also wanted to see the smithy and the schoolhouse, for which they paid five cents more. In her hat, dress, blouse, and parasol, Abigail led them through the public house and mill. People laughed, thought it was great fun, and happily paid their nickels every step of the way. By the time the Prince George's County crowd had seen everything, they complained that we didn't have lattes, tapas, or even a brewpub.

We were so busy with the visitors, we got behind on basic cleaning, filling the hand towels in the bathrooms, and snacks and drinks. They were asking for the moon. They complained about little things and allowed their kids to climb on everything. At least the nickels continued to roll in and we were making a little on the grain milling. I came to regard those nickels as a symbol of the dying old economy and the greed and power-mongering that had brought it down. During the evening hours, Abigail, Hermes, and I played poker with nickels. We paid some bills with rolls of nickels, which we also used to buy fuel for the tractor. Hermes joked about the Nickel Standard and contemplated living one day without federal cash at all. The Fox News whack jobs cast us as anti-American:

"Virginia Bottomites mock U.S. economy with five-cent tariff."

Apparently this earned us a distinguished spot on the Homeland Security watch list.

One night, Abigail said she was concerned about how to make the village livelier.

"Entertainment would be nice. We're a village, aren't we?"

"It looks that way."

"Then what we need is a village idiot. He could be our entertainment."

"A village idiot. Why didn't I think of that?"

"You know. A jester. A busker. A street entertainer."

"Where do you advertise for a village idiot?"

"How about—the *Village Voice?* We'll get some clown or out-of-work actor. He can live in one of the rooms and pay a percentage of what he makes performing."

She could tell by my face that I thought she had lost it. "Abigail, all the nickels in the world aren't going to keep this place afloat."

"I guess I'm agreeing, Luray. Should we go up to a dime?"

I was glad to see she was coming around. She knew she'd have to raise money for life's necessities—including a new planter for the tractor.

Certain that nothing would come of it, I advertised online for a village idiot. Astoundingly, and within an hour, we received 1,251 applicants, ranging from disgruntled schoolteachers, ex-farmers, waiters, trades people, and network engineers—but also several hundred actors. One application in particular intrigued us, as it was written in jests and rhymes. Abigail invited its author, Quinn Follett, to apply in person, and told him to bring his toothbrush and oogah horn. We now had a miller, a farmer, a weaver, and a village idiot, who had provided no particular ETA.

♦ ♦ ♦

Abigail and I soon found ourselves overwhelmed as we continued to shepherd tourists around Dunkard Bottom and fend off requests to rent rooms for the night. I dissuaded Abigail from thinking about the DB B&B. The freeloading thrill-seekers wanted lunch, too, but we weren't prepared for anything like that. Besides, the supplies alone would cost more than we could take in. We were arguing about the vegetable garden not being ready and how badly we needed help, when a commotion at the north end of town brought me running across the bridge. An old Buick was stopped at the toll gate, steam hissing from under the hood.

Our troll was irate and accosting the family with his can and sinister eyes.

"Pay now! You pay now!"

And it was up to me to fix it. Who could blame me for loathing the situation? I, who generally disliked people fairly evenly across the board without regard to color, race, or religion, had no choice but to take control.

"What's the trouble here?"

The woman behind the wheel had a weathered face and wore no make-up. She squinted away from the sun to scrutinize me as I scrutinized her. Tufts of white frizzy hair sought escape at the edges of a red bandana.

A husky teenage boy brooded beside her.

"Come on, Gram, let's get out of here."

"Georgie, let me talk with the man." She turned to me and said, "This troll fella here wants a nickel, but we don't have five cents between us. We're just passing through. Please, we have to get to North Carolina."

I knew what it was like not to have a nickel, so I handed the woman some coins. She flipped a nickel to the troll who caught it in his can with a cackle. He threw his full weight onto the pole and raised the toll gate. The woman thanked me and clunked the wheezing car into Drive.

As she drove over the bridge into the village, I felt the need to reason with the troll.

"Would you please stop bothering people?"

"Leave me be!" he sputtered. "Leave me be!"

"Why do you live out here in the woods like this anyway?" I asked, weary of his act. "Don't you ever need anything? Don't you ever need food?"

He got so close to my face, his eyebrows tickled my chin, and his breath made me gag. He flayed his fingers.

"*Khaaak*—Go 'way! Go 'way. You'll be late for Judgment Day."

I shook off his threatening snarl and followed the car to the store where it broke down in the street with a smoky *chuff*. A late model Escalade pulled up behind it and the driver laid on her horn.

I casually approached her window. "May I ask why you're honking?"

"Because it's a—*road,"* reasoned the smartly coordinated woman. "And they've, they've *stopped* and won't let me *pass."*

"Obviously, their car broke down," I tutored. "Suppose we try to help them instead."

She closed her window in a huff, blasted the air conditioning, and folded her arms.

The driver of the first car introduced herself as Fleeta Laine. Her graying hair matted to her damp neck, she sopped sweat with a handkerchief, explaining with a strained smile that they had somewhere to be.

"My husband got sick, and the hospital took our house. And now this car is finished," she held her tears. "Someone gave it to us so we could reach my family in Raleigh—what'll we do?" She feebly caressed the steering wheel with her fingers. "Now we're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere."

"Oh, Gram," moaned a young woman in the back seat.

I corrected her, "This would actually be the edge of nowhere, because we are, technically, somewhere."

The young woman in the backseat laughed.

Fleeta Laine began to cry.

"Well, you're not alone," I mumbled half to myself. "There are a lot of people around these days who've lost everything," I mumbled half to myself. "Cheer up. Look, we'll get you going again. At least you're on the right road to North Carolina, you just—"

I was cut off by a blast of chugging and backfire. Hermes bounded up behind us, bouncing on the steel seat of the old tractor. I begged him to turn it off, but he hollered that it might never start again. He needed to check it out.

Abigail strode up as Fleeta got out of the car. I explained who they were and Abby made a pitch.

"Instead of going to North Carolina, why don't you join us? All you'd have to do is help with the gardens."

I was livid. Abigail had no idea who these people were.

Fleeta Laine wiped her face again. Her voice shook.

"Here? We can't—. Thank you—but no, we—"

Looking up from his iPhone, the boy got out of the car.

"We might be better off here than Raleigh, Gram."

Mrs. Laine reached inside the car to grab a map.

"What is this place anyway?"

"Dunkard Bottom."

The voice from the backseat repeated excitedly. "Dunkard Bottom? *The* Dunkard Bottom?"

"The only one I know of."

Mrs. Laine introduced her grandson Georgie and granddaughter Willow Ann, who also got out of the car to greet us. Georgie was a strong, stocky boy of fifteen and his sister, older by seven years, a reedy blonde with small blue eyes and asymmetrical dimples. Emerging shyly from the car and shrinking by the bumper was another child, an intense little boy of about seven who locked his light gray eyes deliberately on persons and things.

"And who's this?"

"That's Jeffey. He doesn't talk."

Willow Ann oversold their willingness. "We had a garden in our front yard in Hagerstown," she smiled. "And in our backyard, too, toward the end. And I've read *Permelia Lyttle's Guide* cover to cover, twice. Look. I have my own copy."

The book had been dog-eared into a ratty clump.

Mrs. Laine emerged from the car and planted her hands on the hips of her heat-wrinkled dress.

She poked her finger like a six-gun.

"Wait just one minute. This is the place we saw on CNN."

"Dunkard Bottom," I beamed. "That's us."

"So—you're the doomsday cult."

Willow Ann reddened. *"Gram."*

The comment amused Abigail.

"We're not much of a cult. I mean, we aren't affiliated with a religion of any kind, except maybe self-preservation. We're only taking precautions in case of, you know, Armageddon."

"Like I said," Mrs. Laine fumed, "a doomsday cult."

"Stop it, Gram," scolded the Laine grandkids.

"You don't have to worry," I told them. "About the only thing we bow down to around here is weeds, but that's to pull them out."

Fleeta didn't smile. She scrutinized our faces and the surrounding buildings for signs of danger.

Willow Ann tried to smooth it over.

"Gram, Aunt Paula said North Carolina's bad." Willow Ann explained the rest to Abby and me. "The Technical Triangle went bust after the computer and rocket work shifted to Indonesia. Kids play basketball in the empty manufacturing plants down there."

Fleeta was more than a little against the idea. The family talked it over. The vote was two against one, silent Jeffey abstaining.

With sullen defeat, she agreed.

"We have no way to leave here anyway," muttered Fleeta. "Surely the government will fix all this. And I sure wish they'd hurry."

"Oh, Gram. You and your undying faith in the oligarchy."

Georgie elbowed his sister. "Butt out, Willow Ann."

Abigail made eyes at me about Fleeta's comment, but we didn't press for an explanation. My wife gave them the key to the schoolhouse and told them how to switch on the water heater so they could take showers. They collected their belongings from the car and walked down the road while Fleeta lectured the kids with "your mother" this and "your mother" that.

I was contemplating the consequences of Dunkard Bottom's growth, when the driver of the second car demanded, "I want to know what you intend to do with this car?"

I gave Hermes a hand signal. He saluted and backed the tractor close. He hooked a chain under the car's frame and commenced to drag the steaming wreck down Main Street and out of sight.

♦ ♦ ♦

By early dusk, Hermes had hooked up the gang plow and began turning the acres behind the schoolhouse and post office. That soil hadn't been opened in years, and Dunkard Bottom smelled sweet and earthy. With the loamy riverside so rich and eager to give life, I took a walk. Behind the barn, I found Jason lying down, panting lazily by the water's edge. I sat with him in the shadows and scratched him around the ears.

"Do you like it here, buddy?"

He smiled.

"Those alpacas—do they herd like sheep?"

He looked at me sideways.

"I didn't mean to imply that you're less than professional."

He barked once for "Yes."

"I'm still making up my mind about Dunkard Bottom," I told him. "I miss Belvedere. Don't you?"

He didn't care one way or the other. He slow-blinked his eyes and licked my hand.

From deep in a pocket, I produced Dr. Palmer's little envelope of pills. I spilled one into my palm.

Jason barked twice for "No."

Jason was usually right in these matters.

"That chapter of my life's over, isn't it."

He barked, "Yes."

"You're my best friend, aren't you buddy?"

Another bark, and I said, "You don't want me to take it, do you?"

He put his paw on my knee. I surprised my dog by reaching over to the

water and dumping them out.

"There. All done. Come what may."

Jason was pleased. We locked eyes and decided on a game. We pretended to be keen forest animals. We crouched by the water, lowered our heads and drank long and deep from the river. My dog and I shared a chuckle.

A little later on, Jason and I found Abigail at the Lyceum. She seemed pensive and fragile as the last garnet wink of sunset splashed the clouds with purples and pinks.

"Is it Utopia yet?"

I hugged her close.

"Maybe, hon. Maybe as close to Utopia as humans can get."

A breeze stole in and cooled us as the cicadas called and answered their secret codes.

"The stars are so beautiful here, Luray. Like diamonds on black velvet."

Out there in the boonies, there was no ambient light. No shopping-center corona, turnpike glow, or LED sign boards. We identified Saturn, and joked that the Moon was stalking Jupiter. Mars was overhead and Sirius twinkled like a pin spot, broadcasting the most ancient story that had ever been. While Jason slept beside us, we soaked in the starlight for a long while. Over in the public house, a lone window glowed dim yellow—Hermes would be enjoying his room more than any of us could understand. Tillie's light was on, too, and two schoolhouse windows glowed softly yellow behind drawn shades. as the Laines settled in.

Abigail nodded her head in that direction. "Fleeta and the grandkids." She shrugged. "Sounds like a Disney movie."

"I hope they work out," I said. "I do hope all of this works out."

"Yeah," Abby murmured without certainty.

Around ten, we took Jason inside and settled in our own room. Abigail got ready for bed and asked me to switch on the radio.

AM radio bristled between angry hatemongering and teenage reporters keeping score on celebrities. What passed for news was custom-calculated for its divisive value. For anything resembling real news, you had to tune in the BBC and other English-language programming from overseas. One could piece together a profile on the U.S. that went something like this. The 2000 Coup was far behind us and forgotten. Our election process turned into a violent joke that amused African villagers. Congress was still in chaos. No one seemed to be in control of anything except for the One Percent and their media empires.

And the state of the world? The nations were now indebted to the World Bank and paying millions per day in interest. That wasn't news, but bank

deposit records had been stored in the Deep Web Cloud for security reasons, they said, which was fine until a massive hack stole millions of records and deposits. The hack was blamed on China, launched from India, but ultimately traced to Germany by way of the Maldives.

An Australian reporter laughed gleefully that goats had been seen grazing in the empty U.N. offices eating drafts of old White Papers, so I switched to shortwave. An English-language broadcast from Europe explained that missiles were being readied and that preemptive drone strikes were occurring secretly in every country where mischief could interfere with fracking. Governments were paralyzed with absurd childish bickering. One Arkansas town had used a drone against a neighboring town, and the Supreme Court ruled that the Second Amendment allowed citizen groups to have their own armed missile bases. Thieves were casing houses with tiny drone cameras. The world's credit card numbers had been coopted by some kid in Bulgaria, and all he bought with the loot was an industrial skid of frozen pizza and some video games. The U.S. had deployed the Corporate Army in four countries. Embassies were closing throughout the Middle East, and diplomats were hurrying home. Fleeta Laine's faith in the government to fix things was downright creepy, but like most people, she had no idea what was really going on, but was willing to fight for it.

Abigail and I tucked ourselves into bed feeling a nagging sense of doom amid the ditzy, silly-head chat of the teenage news commentators. With Jason already asleep on his bed in the corner, Abigail squirmed out of her nightclothes beneath the covers. Dunkard Bottom had indeed taken over our lives, but maybe it had also saved us, even if the world didn't end. It felt good to stop time for a while and feel her warm body against me. We made love that night in something of a hurry, as though trying to hold onto what remained of the comfortable and familiar.

Five

Anomalies

WE WATCHED IN WONDER as our population and coffers grew. Curious sightseers continued to stream into town to marvel at the strange little hamlet in the hollow with the troll, alpaca fleece scarves, and a working grain mill. When Mr. Miller levered the great millstones into motion, you could feel the ground rumble in your feet. Tourists applauded like they were at King's Dominion.

The visitors messed up the bathrooms, but they did leave behind money, happy to deposit into the Doomsday Kitty Box that silent Jeffey had made (against Abigail's wishes). The sightseers also left behind occasional recruits for Abby to collect—odd human pieces that seemed to complement her end-of-the-world puzzle.

One particular group of visitors seemed equally infected with praise and vitriol. However, they had brought with them a solitary, rather particular man in his mid-thirties who had with him a potter's wheel and a box of muddy tools. Connor Miggs was an obsessively neat and shrinking soul who mentioned how fine the river clay was thereabouts, and how, by rearranging the fire brick in the forge, he could fashion a kiln to create a type of pottery that would be unique to the place.

"I'll call it Dunkard Bottom Rock-Ku."

Abigail recognized right away that he was talking inventory for the store, so she invited him at once to join us. Yeah, we had to have a potter. It was so Permelia.

With the help of George and Jeffey, Tillie the weaver had gently shorn the alpacas, much to the critters' relief, and amassed heaps of fiber in various colors: white, cream, brown, tan, and black. Jason voiced his concern that he had liked the animals the way they were, and they'd better not come after him with one of those clippers. I reassured him.

"Border collie outerwear won't be in vogue in our lifetime, my friend."

"It already is," insisted the contrary Fleeta. "Dog fur and cat fur is in our stores, you just don't know it. Comes from China and Korea. It's a huge cost-savings at the manufacturing end."

Apparently, Fleeta Laine was our resident capitalist. Great, I thought, just what we needed.

Tillie was a consummate pro—she had brought with her three looms of varied widths and had also contributed several boxes of groceries to the larder. We gave her half the store space as a workshop and the other half for displaying and selling the village products. She named the alpacas after ancient queens and conquerors: Theodosia, Hannibal, Livia, Isabella, and Darius.

Willow Ann helped card the fiber and Tillie discovered that Fleeta already knew how to spin. She spun all day, and her grandkids had to force her to eat something, which is when we found out that her grandchildren were vegans.

"They eat like rabbits," Fleeta jeered, and Willow Ann made like buck teeth and munched a carrot at her threateningly.

"They didn't get it from me. Was from their mother, God rest her confused soul."

"Mother wasn't confused," Georgie defended. "She had a conscience."

Willow Ann grimaced. "Gram sucks rib bones. Eats ducks and lambs, too."

Georgie said, "If it cries for its mama, we don't eat it."

Fleeta went back to spinning and spun so late into the evening that she had to be ordered back to her quarters to get some rest. We suspected some type of OC problem going on there, along with a penchant for critizing everyone and everything.

More tourists came, in cars, mini-buses, and on motorcycles. Some came backpacking or riding bicycles. Some stumbled upon us, while others came out of deliberate curiosity. A pair of back-packing folk musicians joined us. In their late-thirties, the big bearded Ben Kramer and earth mother Edwinna Jenkins. In his brown coveralls, Ben played guitar, banjo, and mandolin, while Edwinna played the fiddle and autoharp. She wore a tiara of daisies over her auburn page-boy hair. Red sneakers set off the effect. That very day, they sat on stumps outside and played under a maple tree, drawing attention and many nickels. They said they'd like to be part of Abigail's experiment so before they could change their minds, Abby moved the duo into one of the rooms in the public house. I was starting to wonder if Dunkard Bottom might work after all.

One windy and cloud-studded day a hard and squarish woman rolled into town in a shiny new Dodge Ram pick-up. Her cold eyes inspected us with distrust. In a southern lilt, she told us she was due in Philadelphia in two weeks but wanted to visit Dunkard Bottom because of the CNN story. She gave her name as Mickey Neeley.

Abigail welcomed her with the astonishment that good fortune inspires.

She assigned her a room in the Public House.

"Mickey, we are so glad to have you."

She rolled lips inward. "Just so we're clear, you don't have me, Miz Flitch."

Abby shrunk back. "I just mean that we're glad you're here."

At that moment, a comically inquisitive Hermes Dill came upon us. He confronted Mickey, and the two of them froze in disbelief. Eyes wide, they squared off like kickboxers.

"Hermes of Athens?"

"Michelline of Savannah?"

They broke into big wordless grins and gawked a long moment. They nearly hugged, but stiffened at us watching them.

"Hello there," Hermes mumbled. "I haven't—. We never—I mean back when—"

"Hermes Dill," shook her head and her eyes moistened. "Well, ain't you a sight for—" She stopped herself. Lowered her eyes. "Surprised as hell to see you, Hermes."

"Yup."

"Yup."

Off they went, Mickey to unpack, and Hermes to the barn. The fates had reunited Mickey and Hermes, but whatever their story was, it was not for our ears.

Even as our numbers grew, the food situation held its own. Some who joined us brought boxes of food that the community held in common in the kitchen. Visitors occasionally left green cash contributions in Jeffey's Doomsday Kitty. It looked like we'd have enough food until our own vegetables came in. What little money we collected allowed us to purchase groceries from a country store over in Eden Valley, as well as fuel for the tractor and dog food for Jason. My intelligent border collie dog had expanded his duties from supervising the alpacas to supervising everyone. He would herd us inside at mealtime and herd us back outside to work. He had herded one particularly rude family back into their car. It was hilarious. Everyone loved Jason except, of course, for the rude family, who said they'd sue us for keeping a vicious wolf. Even Jason found that amusing.

♦ ♦ ♦

We were astounded by how much food the growing community consumed, and our need for a cook moved to top priority. We all toyed with cooking. Each week we collected our promised royalty share of Amish flour and meal, so Ben and Edwinna consented to bake bread every couple of days. We were

fortunate that silent Jeffey liked the burnt parts. The group was supposed to be taking turns cooking, but that isn't how it worked out. Abigail and I had cooked for ourselves at Belvedere, but all we had time for now was canned bean soup and lumpy mashed potatoes.

One rainy afternoon a natty young couple from Richmond pulled into town in a Ferrari. The man handed the keys to Georgie as though he were a valet—Georgie drove the car around the Needful Lane loop and parked it once again in front of the Public House, handing the man his keys back and holding out his hand for a tip. The couple smirked through the tour and regarded us like contestants on some type of reality TV show. Abigail and I cooked dinner that night, and they winced at how bad the food was. When they wanted to know how much they owed, Abigail smiled shyly, ten dollars? They laughed and left fifty as though tipping a doorman.

The next night, we citizens occupied the tables and waited the longest time for dinner, only to discover that nobody had cooked anything at all. Ben and Edwinna had baked four loaves of bread that morning, but we'd eaten them by lunchtime.

The citizens turned their hungry eyes to Abigail and me.

"We've cooked four days in a row," Abigail complained. "Somebody else do it. Go on—Luray and I can't do it all. Open some cans. Boil some water."

Fleeta Laine squirmed. "I'd cook but you don't have a microwave."

Grinning hugely, Willow Ann said, "Gram's a regular Julia Child."

She went back to the kitchen where she tried to figure out which end of the spatula to hold. She stared helplessly at the cans and onions.

She returned with a family-size bag of potato chips, which she tossed onto the table, plopping her chin back down on her hands.

Mickey had been scowling in the doorway. Bull-like, she shoved chairs out of her way and addressed us generally.

"Awright, I've had it with you people. I was a stove monkey. I'll cook the goddamn dinner if you just quit whining."

The kitchen came alive with clatter and chopping. Half an hour later, she brought out an expertly prepared dinner with sides and sauces. Later on, I googled her name on Abigail's laptop and learned that she had been much more than a stove monkey. She was a highly trained chef who'd had her own restaurant for years, Michelline's on Main in Savannah, Georgia.

It wasn't long before Georgie dubbed her Mad Mickey, which quickly caught on among the villagers. She had earned our respect in more ways than one. She cooked again the following evening, and Abigail cornered her afterward.

"Mickey, we all really love your food. We voted, and we'd like you to be

our cook."

"Cook?"

"I mean chef. That's what you are, right? That's all you'd have to do. You could live here with us and just be the chef—for us and the tourists. It would help us bring in money. We want you to stay."

"Are ya deaf? I told you I'm leaving Friday for Philly for a paying job."

"Okay, okay," Abigail said, lifting her hands in surrender. "Sorry."

At least we'd have a chef until Friday.

♦ ♦ ♦

Our numbers swelled with more refugees from the American dream. The badger-like Ralph Flanagan, Esq. was a finance lawyer from Boston who had been abandoned by his company when the bar association shut them down for medieval billing practices. They wouldn't play ball with the Great Big Umps, whoever they were, so the firm lost its federal contracts. Worst of all, their bonuses disappeared into a bank account in Eritrea that subsequently vanished like vapor. Flanagan had fled Boston after his investments tanked, he said, but he seemed to Hermes more like a man on the run.

His reason for stopping at Dunkard Bottom?

"I liked *Permelia Lyttle's Guide,* and I wanted to—get back to the land," the droopy-eyed jurist said without conviction. "Maybe I could bunk in the post office. I could help with your civic, administrative, and legal matters." He noticed my pocket bulging with nickels. "Pro bono, of course. Also, I'm out of gas."

"Well that sounds like a good deal," I pondered, "except that we don't have any matters of any kind yet. Except weeding the gardens."

He sniggered, "How hard can that be?"

Abigail pouted, her hands at prayer beneath her chin.

"How I wish we could call you the postmaster. Suppose we just call you the Man of Law?"

"Sounds Chaucerian," he mused with a smile. "I like it."

All he had brought with him were an iPhone, some clothes, a few expensive cigars, and a couple hundred dollars in cash, which he donated to the town coffers—no strings attached.

"Better ration those cigars, though," I cautioned. "We won't be planting tobacco this year."

He had left the gasless Lexus in front of the schoolhouse, but Hermes determined that it was illegally parked and towed it out back to park with the Buick. We'd begun to call that area the Junkyard of the Twenty-First Century. It seemed to define the end of an era as we watched that fine automobile be-

ing towed away in chains.

With the Man of Law's donated money, Abby and Fleeta made a food run that same day. Mad Mickey had all the fodder she needed to make a stunning three-course dinner. During the cooking, however, a rumpus erupted in the kitchen. Apparently, volunteers had thrown unwashed vegetables into the soup, and the cussing embarrassed the women. Some of the men, too. Georgie and the Man of Law fled the kitchen and ducked a wind-milling frying pan that clanged off the far wall.

"Would you pick food off the ground and eat it without washing it? Huh? Then don't throw it in my goddamn soup!"

Out in the dining room, the Man of Law swore, "I will never work for that creature again."

But Mickey had heard. She came out with a plate of food and eye-balled every one of us.

"And you're all on notice—this ain't the Public House no more. From now on it's *my* restaurant."

Abigail frowned. *"Your* restaurant?"

"From now on, you'll call this place Anomalies, or you'll answer to me."

I quietly asked Hermes, "So is she staying or what?"

"I ain't askin' her. You can if you want."

Abigail was frustrated by people making decisions without her approval—but she wasn't about to argue with Mad Mickey. She had grown up with servants who fulfilled with a smile all that was asked of them. In Dunkard Bottom, it seemed that everyone thought they were in charge.

As for Mad Mickey herself, she could make a meal out of anything, as long as the citizens kept stocking the pantry. She took on the early baking so we had fresh rolls for breakfast along with pan-fried oatmeal (milled next door) and fresh strawberries that grew wild around the edges of the fields. She placed signs in the windows of her "dream restaurant" that we had been forbidden to call the Public House anymore:

Anomalies
No steaks
No chops
No service
"Where the kitchen's always closed."
Today's Special: Keep out. This means you.

Outsiders thought Anomalies the hottest new approach to hospitality and food service, so it was packed from that day forward. The place murmured

with grinning tourists who thought they "got the joke," and malingering Dunkard Bottomers could be found hanging out there, too. The place was busy for lunch and dinner no matter what Mickey served. We even heard that we were poaching business from the Inn at Little Washington, though no federal bigwigs had ventured out our way. The growing population ate well, too, three meals a day for the first time. For outsiders, Mickey charged restaurant prices.

♦ ♦ ♦

By all appearances, Dunkard Bottom had become every inch the commonsense community described in the Guide. We barely muddled through our farm work under the tutelage of a frustrated Hermes Dill, but, despite our collective inexperience, we had successfully planted some crops. The vegetables had subsequently grown, and we had begun eating the produce. We savored the zucchini, yellow squash, and broccoli. We were picking peas and green beans. The corn was already waist high. Many of us had never tasted vegetables fresh from the garden before. Hermes bartered for a rooster and some hens to set up a chicken coop at the side of the barn, which brought protests from the vegans: Willow Ann, Georgie, and Jeffey, who expressed his disapproval by sticking out his tongue.

Connor's unique Dunkard Bottom Rock-Ku ceramics were eye-popping artisan pieces of red, yellow, and blue clay, glazed with something he made from river sand and some secret stuff he'd brought with him. The pieces were selling in the store alongside Tilly's knitted and woven alpaca goods—she made labels for a line of JasonWare® (shake dry) with a little black-and-white face stitched in. She had recruited silent Jeffey and taught him weaving, which the intense little boy took to with a big wordless smile. We began to trade some of those goods with our neighbors for necessities, mostly Amish products and food supplies that our gardens wouldn't supply us until fall. The Amish milled their grain and paid their handsome dividends. The Amishmen thought us peculiar, however, even more than regular outsiders. To them, our notion of preparing for the end of the world was "exceeding foolish," as such matters were entirely in the hands of God.

Despite my early resistance to Abigail's dream child, I was adapting and tried to help wherever I could. A standing joke went like this: "How many writers does it take to stake a tomato bush?" etc. The answer was, "One if Luray doesn't help. Five if he helps." The older citizens complained about sore muscles and the young ones enjoyed the novelty of the farm, barn, river, hills, and woods—and the summer in general for not having to go to school. Fleeta set about creating the Dunkard Bottom Honor Library, wherein she

localized all our books and brought more from valley flea markets.

A smile had etched onto Abigail's face as she tallied the signs of her success. We had left the cities and gathered in the mountains. We were drinking clean water and had restored our mill. We were learning how to grow our own food and become self-sufficient. A few of us possessed skills in crafts, soon to be called trades again if the Guide proved correct. But owing to our solar panels, we hadn't exactly learned how to live without electricity. We were not eager for a lesson of that type.

Whether Dunkard Bottom bloomed into a viable community or eventually wilted, I was still determined to return to our easy life at Belvedere. If the world ended none of it would matter. But if human beings somehow survived the Big Event, she and I would leave Dunkard Bottom in the hands of the villagers. If December came and went without so much as an apocalyptic hangnail, I would persuade Abigail to give them the village anyway and thank her never to mention humankind's swansong again.

So I resolved to ensure that the village continue on its present course, and that involved no small amount of espionage on my part. I kept my nose to the wind and sniffed out anything that might foil my plan—such as citizen applicants.

♦ ♦ ♦

One drizzly gray morning there had been no visitors. The street and lanes were wet and quiet. The villagers seemed in a universally laconic mood when two men rumbled into town on chopped Harleys. Not wearing helmets, both were in their twenties. One was blue-eyed with a military-style crewcut. The younger man was a Gen-Y punk with long black hair, and dark defiant eyes.

The younger one asked, "You the people cashing in on the end of the world?"

We could no doubt thank FoxNews for the sarcasm.

Ex-Army whacked the younger man in the shoulder. He thrust out his hand.

"I'm Beecher Simpson. This is my brother Cody. We want to know if this is Dunkard Bottom."

"Yes it is," I told them.

Cody tossed his hair off his forehead, tucked his arms, and leaned back against his bike. Beecher explained that he was an Afghanistan war veteran with two tours.

"We'd like to join the camp—are you the one in charge?"

"Well, everyone here thinks they're in charge. But I'm Luray Flitch. I'm sort of a personal assistant to the CEO."

Abigail approached from the direction of the mill dressed something like a suffragette. Upon first seeing them, she began fixing her hair. That seemed to be nearly all the women's reaction to those guys.

"These are the Simpson brothers," I told her. "They're applying for the greater good of Dunkard Bottom, and apparently willing to get their hands dirty."

Abby said, "We're preparing for winter, just now."

"We are?" I asked with alarm.

She ignored me. "We have rooms. They're yours if you want to stay."

From the privacy of his dark eyes, Cody eyed Abigail the way Jason looked at the alpacas.

"We heard about your town," Beecher made deliberate eye contact with Abby and me. "We'd be honored, ma'am."

He elbowed Cody. "Right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

The rugged young men moved into the schoolhouse and were ready for work as the citizens assembled for lunch. But the Simpson boys didn't eat. They went right to weeding the kitchen garden, out in the damp mist, on Beecher's principle that they wouldn't take their first meal until they'd done some work. They learned quickly and worked well that afternoon, and Abigail and I both knew two strong young men were not only welcome but needed. At suppertime, we realized that we needed to double our food supply. All eyes were on the new men, for a garden variety of reasons.

♦ ♦ ♦

A week later, I observed that we were sowing more than vegetables at Dunkard Bottom. We'd also begun to sow the seeds of discord. Trouble came to a head one night after dinner when Cody Simpson explained the real reason they'd come.

"My brother and me needed to disappear for a while. We saw you on TV."

Willow Ann's eyes on Cody, she pulled out her dog-eared book. "A lot of us here follow the advice of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide.*"

Cody and Beecher had never heard of it.

Georgie said, "It all came true, so far."

"Occult claptrap," sneered Fleeta, cupping Willow Ann's shoulder, "You kids don't get enough protein and it's gone to your heads."

Georgie mock banged his head on the table.

Willow Ann griped,"Gram!" The girl rebooted her smile and addressed Cody directly. "The Guide says to make a community that can survive. That's all. It's not a path. It's a lifeboat to survive what's coming."

"Survive the end of the world," muttered the Man of Law facetiously. "I like that. Sounds so—*doable."*

"People everywhere sense something terribly wrong behind the scenes," Tillie said. "It's worse than anyone knows. We sense it and feel like we're trapped."

Connor Miggs ventured shyly, "Yeah, fear of annihilation. Like in the fifties."

"I think it's in our genes," Edwinna said. "In the collective unconscious. Like we've all lived through global disasters before, many times."

Fleeta bunched her face. "Reincarnation? Are you nuts?"

Willow Ann doubled down. "That's why Dunkard Bottom's so important. Even if the end doesn't come, we'll at least be showing people how to live better lives. Maybe we were guided here."

"We didn't all come here for that," scoffed Ben. "Edwinna and I had nowhere else to go."

Fleeta dug in her heels. "That's more like it—finally an honest answer."

Beecher had come in and was drying his hands on his pants.

Fleeta said, "This country is much better off than we were before the Coup."

"Well, I don't know how much of the world you've seen," he glowered. "But I've been in the Middle East, and Africa, and Southeast Asia. You don't know how we're hated in the world. There's obscene wealth beside obscene starvation. The demons at the top have made the biggest international drug and slave empire the world has ever known. I've seen it with my own eyes. It's there. And it's here, too."

Cody wagged his head wearily. "Beech, jeez."

"You either love your country or you hate it," Fleeta ridiculed.

Beecher sat back. "Or you change it."

The Man of Law offered, "We've all been swindled. There's no doubt. We've been divided and conquered and systematically disinformed. Nothing's what it seems. Most everyone here's lost what they had. Good means bad. Bad means good. Extreme ideas have become gospel, and the god-fearing war-mongers believe God's on their side."

Fleeta patronized him. "You're either going to be raised up or condemned to hell. Your choice."

Ben pushed his hat forward. "Hell is people telling me that I'm condemned."

"This is some kind of cult," sneered Fleeta. "I was right from the beginning."

Abigail normally abhorred political talk, but couldn't resist. "If it'll make

you feel better, we could sacrifice a baby radish at midnight."

I was so proud of her.

"Very funny, Mrs. Flitch," Fleeta squinted. "The end will come when it comes, and I am prepared. When it's time, I shall be raised up. I was told so in a dream."

Abigail patted my arm sympathetically, because she knew my antipathy for people who claim to know what God thinks. I prided myself at being an orthodox agnostic.

Georgie didn't look up from his texting. "I think the end of the world means the world as we know it, and it already happened."

Employing his own brand of pharmacopeia, Cody lit a joint. "You folks oughtta lighten up."

"Put that out immediately!" Fleeta ordered.

"Got a law against it?"

"It's Virginia," mumbled the Man-of-Law. "The only state that never legalized it."

Abby stood up. "I don't care what you're smoking. But there's no smoking at Anomalies. Of any kind."

Cody spit in his palm and hissed the joint out.

Willow Ann and Georgie sighed in disappointment.

Fleeta got smug. "Drug addicts. Motorcycle bums and cult members."

Whenever she spoke, Willow Ann blinked her eyes with precision and shifted her mouth to the left. I could tell that Abigail was annoyed.

"Gram, I am gonna miss you if you get raised up."

Opinions about the end of the world ran sixty-forty in favor of a December apocalypse. Everyone but Hermes had spouted his views, so Cody singled him out to commit one way or the other.

"What about you, grandpa? Where do you go to church?"

Hermes didn't like his tone. "In the cathedral of nature, if it's any of your business. And I ain't nobody's grandpa. That I know of." He scratched his white chin whiskers. "I normally eschew the perpetuation of weary clichés, but signs are everywhere that the end is nigh. Rising waters. Nukes. Phony wars. Real wars. Earthquakes and floods. And ya got fire ants, killer hornets, super termites, Africanized bees, and tsunamis. Hurricanes. Tornadoes."

Hermes continued. "The polar bears are drowning and the whales are throwing themselves up on the beach. The oak trees don't make enough acorns no more, and the whole food supply is toxic with poisons."

Georgie added, "In school? We learned that in the Pacific there's a garbage patch double the size of Texas. And a section of the Gulf of Mexico big as Massachusetts is dead from agriculture run-off."

"That and more." Hermes was on a roll. "There aren't enough honey bees to pollinate the flowers, and the frogs can copulate themselves. Pardon me if I have waxed profane. Pestilence and plagues—diabetes. Cancer hits one out of four—course that's mostly from the U.S. diet. And pollution. All bundled together, it does make you think."

"It matters little what humans think," Fleeta taunted. "God will end the world when God sees fit. Besides, our government would never do us harm. The plutocracy is finally in control, and we should be thankful for our wise business leaders."

Cody rolled his eyes at her. "The Earth takes care of itself. And it would be a whole lot better off without us."

The reserved Beecher grimaced and lowered his eyes to the table.

Suddenly Edwinna hollered. "Could we please just drop it? I don't like this talk. Any of it. Are you all eager to die? Huh? I'm not. I don't want to die. I'm *afraid* to die."

Tillie wanted answers. "So when does the world end, Mr. Dill? When?"

Hermes pressed his lips and shook his head. He hated being on the spot.

"If you ask me, it crept up on us while we weren't lookin'." He seemed to hope that would suffice, but all eyes were on him. "It's in our faces. It's dripping off our overfed chins. Can't you see it?" He thumped his head. "Ya gotta read the handwritin' on the wall and start making plans. And us, here in Dunkard Bottom—this experiment of Mister and Miz Flitch—I'm here because, come rain or shine, this is the smartest place to be."

Connor Miggs mumbled, "It's the normalization of madness out there. I came here for sanity. I hope."

We didn't find out that day the real reason the Simpson boys came to Dunkard Bottom.

Mercifully, the remnant of the conversation left philosophy in the dust and some good news became the topic. We had begun selling knitted and woven pieces and ceramics on the Internet—we were now in the online retail business. We weren't charging nickels, either. We were charging their worth—not their New York City worth. More like their Harrisonburg worth.

Six

White Lightnin'

EVEN WITH ALL OF ABIGAIL'S PLANNING, we never considered how her designer community might affect our privacy—and our marriage. By day, the villagers worked shoulder-to-shoulder in the fields. We labored together, ate our meals together, and for a while played together. That didn't leave much in the way of a personal life. After supper, people sought solitude in the shadows of the mountain hollow, walked the dreamy riverbank, loitered in the leafy orchard, or contemplated eternal life in the cemetery beneath the willows. Most of us walked Needful Lane, watching for those precious moments when it was deserted.

Old-fashioned Abigail called the after-dinner ritual the "Promenade." What a dreamer. But during the promenade, one could observe blossoming friendships as well as some emerging rivalries. People walking the promenade didn't talk much. While seeking solitude, an encounter with anybody else was nearly unavoidable.

A lack of privacy wasn't the only threat to the village. On the promenade you might spy Beecher walking with Willow Ann. Next night, you'd see Cody and Willow Ann playing hide-n-seek in the apple orchard. Pretty soon Beecher and Cody weren't speaking to each other, and Willow Ann wasn't speaking to anyone.

"Why do *men* have to be so *stupid?"*

Tillie Gaston had proved an amiable friend, especially to those who wanted to learn spinning and weaving. Some nights, the store would be alive with people spinning alpaca fiber and flax that they had traded for, and three looms would be *swacking* away at once. In a group, Connor stayed quiet and defensive, but one-on-one he softened up some. Villagers took turns watching him at the potter's wheel as he pulled the sides of a vase up out of a glop of wet clay. He often ate with Tillie, but they closely guarded those personal chats.

Mr. Miller never missed a meal at our communal tables even though he didn't live with us. The secretive mill master would examine the bread loaves fresh from Mickey's oven the way Connor examined vessels out of the kiln. He'd break a loaf, tear at the steaming flesh, and praise the proofing, mois-

ture, gluten content, and texture.

"She's good. Damn good," Miller said referring to Mickey. "But as for me, the mill is my church," Miller one time said with satisfaction. "With those mighty stones I can feed the nations."

"You've got mighty stones, all right," grumbled the Man of Law. "I'll give ya that."

We sometimes saw Hermes and Mad Mickey in one of their wry staring contests or chuckling together at Anomalies' backdoor. Upon sight of an eavesdropper, they'd steel-up and go their separate ways.

One night, Fleeta burst into Anomalies with a news flash.

"Everyone? Everyone—I want you to know that I just saw Cody, Beecher, and my granddaughter skinny dipping in the river. Now, what are you going to do about it?"

"Miss Willow Ann's twenty-one, ain't she?" Hermes inquired with a nostalgic twinkle.

"Luray and Abigail are responsible for what goes on here, not you. No insult intended."

"None taken."

Fleeta demanded, "What do you have to say, Mrs. Flitch?"

Abigail bunched her lips and shouted, "They'd *better* not be using our *towels!"*

Fleeta blamed most everything immoral or portentous on the arrival of the Simpson boys. She had caught Beecher, Georgie, and Willow Ann smoking some sort of wild local cannabis behind the barn only days before.

Cody asked, "Where do you suppose the weed came from?"

The Man of Law theorized, "Thomas Jefferson would be my guess. Most likely eighteenth-century heirloom seeds from Italy."

"I have another theory," Hermes proposed. "This is Johnny Appleseed country. Perhaps Johnny sowed more than apples."

Georgie groaned, "Johnny Appleseed was baked!"

Hermes cleared his throat. "This might explain the Johnny Appleseed story in its entirety, wouldn't it?"

Willow Ann and Georgie cried tears. Even Mickey broke a smile. But not Fleeta.

"Have you people lost your minds?" Fleeta shrieked. "What are you going to do about those motorcycle thugs? They can't be trusted!"

But we were all laughing together for the first time.

♦ ♦ ♦

Over time, I learned to enjoy working in the garden before breakfast. It

was my favorite time because no one else was up yet milling around, yawning, complaining, asking questions, or arguing over who got the best hoe.

One morning, I was cultivating the squash beds when Willow Ann came by in shorts, tank top, and floppy straw hat. The fair young lady was thin and fragile, and approaching a little too close.

"Hermes says he needs the pliers, Mr. Flitch."

I had stowed them in the pocket of my coveralls the night before.

"Call me Luray."

Everyone had commented how Willow Ann was smarter than she acted. You could also call her pretty, from a certain angle.

Sipping from my water bottle, I asked her, "Did you expect to be doing farm work when you came to Dunkard Bottom?"

"Not really," she said. "My training is in electronics engineering."

"Get out of town." I sipped water.

"Really. But I've wanted to come here since the first CNN story, so I don't mind. I've followed you ever since the Guide came out—Luray. You and Miss Abigail are heroes to a lot of people."

"Heroes," I choked on my water. "Truth be told, Abigail dragged me here kicking and screaming. I thought publishing the book was tough enough."

Willow Ann took my face in her hands.

"Luray—what you have here is—it's way heroic. I really admire you. Really a lot."

Not knowing what she intended to do next, I took a step back and cleared my throat.

"I haven't heard compliments like that since my book *The Maze* came out—a long time ago, when I—"

She sighed. "I've read *The Maze* from cover to cover. Or from the inside out, or whatever. It's a work of genius. I think."

I didn't relish the memories of my former literary career—I hadn't published in twenty years. I yanked a tall weed and was about to sniff its white flower.

"No! Go easy with that," she cautioned. "That's Jimsonweed. It's poison. A hallucinogen."

"You don't say."

She felt obliged to instruct me, and as she regurgitated what sounded like an encyclopedic entry, word for word, I realized just how sharp her mind was.

"In old Jamestown, the settlers once made a salad of it for the British soldiers. The Red Coats started hooting like owls and blowing feathers around the camp. They perched in the trees naked and scratched like monkeys."

I threw the seductive blossom on the weed pile—the Jimsonweed, that is.

"You know a lot about history."

"Not really. Just Jimsonweed. My brother's friend tried to snort it once and got a sinus infection. I never snort anything, ever—I mean, not without looking it up first."

"A wise approach. I think."

"Luray, the world's in meltdown. We're glad to be here, my brothers and me. Even my grandmother. We don't know if it's the end. But we're lucky we found this place. We're working hard to prove ourselves. To you and Miss Abigail and the others."

"You already have. You're all doing a great job. And thanks for telling me about the Jimsonweed."

"It's true what they say about you, Luray."

"Big clumsy feet?"

"No," she laughed. "You just—care. You have a good heart."

"Have you been talking with Abigail?"

"No. I don't think she likes me very much."

I was already red-faced when Willow Ann kissed me soft on the lips. I quickly thrust the pliers into her hand and urged her to hurry them over to Hermes.

"Hermes will be impatient, Willow Ann. I mean, Miss—uh—."

Getting back to those seeds of discord, that was the beginning. I glanced up to see Abigail in the bedroom window. She was brushing her hair a hundred strokes a second and scowling like Captain Bligh after the native ceremony.

Once back in the apartment, Abigail was giving me the silent treatment. I'd have to perform some quick damage control.

"Sheesh. What an impetuous girl," I smiled, waving my hand. "Heh—did you see what she did? Planted a kiss on me—I'm sure she was aiming for my cheek and missed."

I wrapped my arms around my wife, but she was stiff as a sycamore trunk.

She squeezed out a phony smile. "You have lipstick on your chin, my husband. Suppose you tidy up a bit before lunch."

♦ ♦ ♦

Managing a village was as hard as—managing a village. Dunkard Bottom had totally hijacked our lives. Abigail and I were talking less. Every night, we fell into bed exhausted from shepherding tourists and working the gardens. Abigail was teaching the women to conduct tours and coordinating goods to sell and trade with the neighboring farmers. And I worked with

Hermes on repairs and made sure he was getting the cooperation he needed. He would indicate "yes," but with a frown or a shrug. The approaching fall had fixed a worry in his eyes, but he smiled nonetheless out of loyalty to me and Abigail, I thought.

After the turning of the leaves, the flow of tourists ebbed. This made the weary villagers complacent. We weren't merely losing interest in the work, we were beginning to resent it. I was reminded of little David and Rebecca Vogt, who had helped clear the brush. The girl had laughed about the previous owners, folks from Bethesda who'd thought farming too hard. I was beginning to understand why.

Without tourists, we could sell no tours, no meals, no scarves, no pots. Traveling in general was down. The cost of medicine had gone out of reach except for those who could afford it. Those who couldn't afford it went without. Perhaps that, too, was part of our return to the nineteenth century—an age of home remedies. Fresh produce had become unaffordable, too—a jar of coffee, a pack of razorblades, and a jug of laundry detergent ran almost thirty dollars. This was ironic because to the Japanese and the Europeans, goods were so cheap here they saved money by flying round trip to the U.S. to shop. People were staying home and hording what little money they had. For Americans, it seemed the end of the world hadn't required explosions or an apocalyptic fire, but merely a hiccup in the supply chain. The only thing threatening Dunkard Bottom so far was ourselves—and people began dropping hints that they wanted to leave.

Discontent spread like wildfire. Citizens began telling each other off about all the minor irritants they'd been saving up. The strife got so bad Abigail's Utopia stood in danger of collapsing altogether. This became apparent one night around seven o'clock at Anomalies.

Tillie straightened. She tilted her head. "People are complaining. Some are simply not working as hard as others."

"Yeah, suppose we start with you," the Man of Law groused. "We slave out there in the hot field while you sit around in the storefront like one of those Amsterdam hostesses, weaving and spinning in the window—*oooh,* such hard work, I'm gonna melt."

"The audacity! How dare you imply that I am a prostitute."

Fleeta got something off her chest, too. "As long as we're on the subject of pulling our weight, Ben and Edwinna do nothing but play and sing all day—even if there's no one there. But they eat as much as we do—especially Ben."

"You could stand to lose a little weight, too, I'm thinking," smiled Ben. "I know—why don't we partner-diet together. It'll be fun."

Edwinna explained, "We work mornings, Fleeta. We pick veggies for

Mickey."

Connor sneered, "You know, you two must be the only hippies left in the whole world. You belong in the Smithsonian."

Ben simmered, "Hippies again."

"Music is our talent," Edwinna argued wearily. "We can't help it if the tourists aren't coming. But we have to practice—and you all enjoy our music."

Fleeta whispered, "The Schumanns you ain't."

"We'll weed if you want," Ben shrugged. "We'll do whatever you want, if you'd just quit bitchin' all the time."

The Man of Law wanted his pound of flesh. "You're all alike. 'My art, my art.' Singing *Wimoweh* fifty times a day isn't what I call work."

"It is work. We hate *Wimoweh.* But what about the miller? Why doesn't he work the gardens?"

I answered truthfully. "Mr. Miller has a full-time job. He operates the mill."

In his perpetual haze of flour dust, Mr. Miller smiled helplessly. "It's the busy season now," he explained amiably. "Remember, I don't actually live here. And I have my own garden to tend at home."

Connor added some accelerant, "I just want all of you to know that I collect and work clay all day long near that hot kiln—and that is hard work. I also don't mind saying that my stuff brings money into this hollow. Most everyone here works—probably Mickey the hardest. What I don't like is how some people here think it's okay to *smoke marijuana* and take a swim in the river when everybody else is working—Cody Simpson—and they think no one sees him, but they do."

Cody swelled with indignation, "We have to take a break once in a while. Abigail says no breaks, but it's hot out."

"I never said no breaks," Abby retorted, incredulous. "I said winter's coming, and we're running out of time, that's all."

I defended my wife. "Abigail just wants what's best for us."

Beecher shifted his jaw. "I told you to leave the dope alone, Cody."

Fleeta cleared her throat. "I don't mean to cause trouble, here, but—"

"Yes you do, Gram."

"Willow Ann, I swear, I'll—!"

Abigail tried to assert herself. "Look—our problem is too much bickering and not enough work. You have to realize what's at stake here. If we can't work together, we're going to end up a village full of angry people who have nothing to eat. Dunkard Bottom will fail us because we have failed each other. We'll be worse off than if we'd never come here. All of us."

Fleeta glared at Beecher. She extended her index finger. "And you're AWOL from the army. What about that?"

Her words silenced the room.

Eyeing Cody, Beecher asked, "How the hell would you know about that?"

Cody eyed Willow Ann, "You *promised!"*

Willow Ann hissed, "Gram, you *promised!"*

"They're fugitives," Fleeta beamed with self-importance. "That's why they came here. They're running from the military police."

Beecher fleered. "We are not! Look, there was a fight, OK?" Beecher fleered. "They put me up on a phony manslaughter charge."

"Beecher was sticking up for a man in his unit," Cody defended.

"It's not something I'm proud of. An officer was riding this Latino kid real bad. He punched him, and officers can't do that. I jumped him, and he hit his head. I didn't desert, not anything like that. But technically—I am AWOL. I didn't want to sit in the brig for the rest of my life. Me and Cody took off and ended up here. It's as simple as that."

The Man of Law offered an opinion. "This could be quite serious for us, now that we know the fact of it. It puts us all in the position of harboring a fugitive from the military. That could mean fines or jail time for the Flitches here."

The crestfallen GI nodded grimly. "I thought I could get a fresh start here, but I guess I was wrong—thanks a lot, Cody."

"We'll go. We'll pack up tonight."

Abigail shouted, "Now everybody wait just a minute! Beecher, sit down. You're not going anywhere. You are far too valuable to us. Fleeta—you seem to be the only one here posing a threat."

Fleeta grinned. "Someone needs to protect our family values. Drugs? Criminals? I no longer feel safe in this environment. This goes for my grandchildren, too."

Willow Ann and Georgie both shouted, "Stop it, Gram."

Beecher got to his feet. He grabbed his gloves and elbowed Cody to join him.

Abigail pleaded. "Look—whatever Beecher did or didn't do is not our problem."

Beecher's mind was made up. "I appreciate all you've done, Miss Abby."

Cody gazed angrily at Willow Ann. "Aw, this just *sucks."*

The Man of Law raised his hand. "Sorry, folks, but I think it's best that I leave, too. I can't do this kind of work. My fingers hurt. I have to get back to some form of goddamn civilization."

"Not you, too," Abigail cried. "Wait—I haven't worked this hard so you

people can quit because you're in a bad mood. Listen to yourselves. You're talking like a bunch of spoiled children."

Apparently Connor wanted to get some things off his chest.

"Just remember, Miss Prissy Heiress—you're the only one here born with a silver spoon."

Watching her dream fall apart, Abigail eyes brimmed. It was time for me to speak up.

"What do you think this is, people, a theme park? A summer camp? We're here because the systems that sustained us are collapsing. Some of you came here because you believed in what we're doing. Some, because you had no place else to go. But you're not listening to the radio like I am. Our leaders are corrupted rotten, and the world has been deliberately made unstable. Do you really think you'd be better off out there? The liars decide what to tell us and what to believe. I say we stick together. If and when the time comes, we need to help Mr. Simpson, not hurt him. And everybody else, too."

Just then, however, a terrified Jeffey burst in screeching for breath. He gestured wildly, pointing outside. Shussing air, he vocalized some syllables.

"Uh, uhhh. UHHHH."

"Whatever it is," Georgie translated, "you can bet the farm it's pretty bad."

♦ ♦ ♦

We left the arguments at Anomalies and followed the boy outside into the night. He led us across Main and around behind the store to the Lyceum, where he pointed.

"Uhhh!"

Abigail's prism armillary lay broken in a heap in the floodlights. The copper filigree bands lay on the ground, the metal bent apart. Its concrete mount was cracked and the prism gone.

In the waning twilight, Abigail touched the torn metal pieces tenderly like an injured bird.

She could barely breathe. "Someone destroyed my armillary. It's ruined. Who would do such a thing? Why?" She angrily scanned their faces. "This was one of a kind. A work of art by the Browns. Do you hate me that much? Do you?"

People shuffled their feet.

Willow Ann wept, "No, Miss Abby—nobody hates you at all. I don't know who did it, but it wasn't me."

Connor said, "I don't know either. I'd tell you if I knew. I liked it. It's a shame."

Fleeta cast a suspicious eye on Beecher, "If I had to guess—"

I'd had enough of the family values judgments.

"Fleeta, don't you think you've done enough guessing for one night?"

The cruel act cast a sickening pall over the citizens of Dunkard Bottom.

Cody moped, "You all think we wrecked the sundial thing, but we didn't."

Connor snipped, "Nobody said you did."

One by one, they denied wrecking the armillary as Abby sobbed.

"So no one did it," I fumed. "If we can no longer trust each other, then maybe it is time for the village to shift gears. Suppose those of you who want to leave just go. But be quick about it so there's time to replace you."

I held Abigail from behind.

Cody sneered, "This is *bullshit,* Beech."

Beecher was ready to explode. He straightened at attention. "We didn't do it, goddamn it. And it doesn't change anything. We leave in the morning."

The Man of Law shrugged. "I'm joining them. Thank you one and all. I appreciate your hospitality."

"Then that's that," I said, unable to hide my disappointment. Abigail turned and buried her face in my shoulder in a tearful rage. "As for the rest of us, tomorrow it's back to the soy beans and corn."

The soon-to-be deserters turned toward their buildings. However, something odd seemed to tinge the air. The atmosphere sweetened. The air charged like before an electrical storm—smelled rich with ozone. You could almost hear a sizzle in the wind. But the sky was clear. The stars blazed like diamonds. The leaves blew upside down and our hair lifted. Then all of a sudden, the lights winked out like someone pulled the plug on a model train board.

"What happened? What was that?"

"Must be the county power."

"Maybe a car hit a pole up the line."

Abigail tried her cell phone. "My cell phone doesn't work."

Others tried theirs—nothing.

"Okay, don't panic," I counseled, though I couldn't specify a reason not to. "I'm sure there's an explanation."

Jeffey began to cry.

"The power'll come back, sweetie," Willow Ann assured him. "They'll turn it back on. You'll see."

Abigail administrated. "I suggest we go back to our quarters. It'll be our first nighttime test of the batteries, so I hope we can all try to be conservative."

As Abigail took my arm, however, the lights popped back on again.

The children rejoiced. "Hooray! The lights are on."

We were much relieved, though the air was still charged. The smell of ozone intensified. Suddenly, the lights winked out again, but this time, the sky flashed white from horizon to horizon. A deafening snap knifed into our ears. My head went hot. The sky lit again with a flash brighter than bright, like when the film breaks at the movie theater. The flash consumed the entire sky at once, but another snap clapped our ears from every direction. We fell to the ground grabbing our throbbing heads. The sky faded once again to black.

We were reeling. Struggling for breath. I couldn't focus my eyes.

"What the hell was that?"

I looked at Abigail. For the first time since I knew her, I saw terror in her eyes. We tried to recover from the assault, blinking and clearing our ears, when another snap threw us forcibly to the ground. The sky relit like bright blank paper.

"Oh God!"

People screamed. "It hurts!"

"What's going on?"

Beecher seethed, "A nuke!"

"Someone nuked Washington. God! They nuked Washington, D.C.!"

Just then, Jason meandered over from the barn, stunned and disoriented. I got to my knees to hug him, but we were bracing each other up.

"Are you all right boy?"

He whined weakly and laid his ears back with a smile.

I could barely clear my vision. Standing up made my head pound. Amid the groaning and crying, other villagers struggled to their feet.

Georgie, Beecher, Ben, and I helped the others. Fleeta was in shock. Willow Ann and Jeffey were shrieking. Connor and Cody held their heads in pain.

Holding her ears, Abigail yelled, "Everybody inside before it happens again."

Seven

Sports Bar Patrons

ONCE INSIDE THE STORE, the citizens collapsed in heaps. Beecher switched on the battery power, so at least we had lights. With tears streaming, Fleeta held Jeffey. Willow Ann wept in the corner, and the Man of Law winced in disbelief.

Cody Simpson was on his feet, the cynical arrogance gone. He brought a jug of water from the restroom and went around offering sips.

Sitting up, Tillie asked, "What about Mickey and Mr. Dill?"

Nobody knew, but no one volunteered to run over to Anomalies to check on them.

"We've got to find out what happened," Beecher insisted.

Abby led the way as Willow Ann, Beecher, Georgie, and I hurried upstairs to the radios. Tillie and several of the others followed.

Abigail tried her cell. "No signal."

Georgie confirmed no Internet access.

I switched on the AM radio, which was eerily empty of announcers, pitches, sports, or music. Just flat white noise. But our windows rattled with the rumble of distant explosions. Suddenly the scream of a jet engine, a dull flash briefly lit the sky well beyond the river.

"No one's broadcasting. Not even emergency alert."

"Maybe their power's out, too," Abigail observed optimistically.

Willow Ann sat at the shortwave. "Here, let me try."

All eyes were on the girl as she slowly scanned the bands. Not a voice to be heard amid the hisses, pops, and beeps of static, along with marine beacons. Distant threads of Morse code wavered up and down. On the aviation band, we heard a desperate pilot trying to raise a control tower. Confused radio announcers could be heard, baffled in all languages. We detected warbled shouts and maydays, but nothing else intelligible. Just then, Willow Ann located a flustered New Zealand broadcast in a weak and wavering signal.

"...SAQ Auckland special report. Bulletin: blasts of an undetermined type were detected in Beijing and Shanghai earlier today. A source in Durban tells us the cause was a U.S.-launched attack by satellite. Blasts of an undetermined type have been detected somewhere in the Middle East, possibly Israel. China has threatened to retaliate. No broadcasts of any kind have been heard from the United States since 0200 GMT."

I had trouble hearing over the gasps.

"What have they done!"

"Quiet everyone."

The Auckland broadcast continued.

"...Anyone who can e-mail SAQ—from anywhere—please confirm that you hear us. We witnessed three bright flashes here, brighter than the Sun, and noted electrical rips in the air. We are unable to raise stations in Sydney, Melbourne, or Brisbane. This is a tape-recorded loop to keep the SAQ Auckland frequency open. We will edit this loop as we learn more. This is SAQ Auckland off regular programming..."

Willow Ann continued to scan the bands, while Abigail buried herself in the circle of my arms. The recovered residents who only moments before had been at each other's' throats, migrated upstairs awaiting what they hoped was the punchline to an elaborate joke.

Ben whispered, "What about our families?"

Cody partially hid behind Beecher's shoulder. "Mom and Dad, Beech. And Lauren."

Edwinna sank to the floor, hyperventilating. "I—don't have the—stomach for this. I can't take—anything like this."

Tillie sobbed as Fleeta held Jeffey in the stairwell. "God help us. God help us all."

"They've finally done it," said the Man of Law. "The demons have finally pushed the goddamn buttons."

"Here, let me try the ham set." I powered it up and began scanning. "CQ. CQ. This is NX4KC, NX4KC calling anyone. Come on?"

We heard a roar of static with two opposing tones rising and falling. I adjusted the frequency several times, but I couldn't raise anyone. Willow Ann continued trying the shortwave and found a woman's voice. The only word we recognized was "Amsterdam." None of us spoke Dutch, but we didn't need it to hear the desperation in her voice.

"Is she terrified because she knows something? Or terrified because she

doesn't?"

"The authorities will explain everything soon," cried Fleeta, her voice breaking up. "I'm sure they will. Our leaders care about us. They'll tell us what to do. You'll see. We just have to wait."

Tillie said, "We're in the middle of something catastrophic, no doubt. The flashes and those big raps in the air must have been the retaliations on the U.S."

Abigail could barely breathe. "Washington—is barely a hundred miles from here."

"But what were they?" demanded an angry Ben. "What made the sky turn white like that?"

"And what about radiation?" asked the terrified Edwinna. "Maybe it's poisoning us right now. Did any of you think of that?"

This set Jeffey bawling again.

Ben elbowed Edwinna. "Nice going."

Beecher shared what he knew from his army training.

"It could have been some type of electromagnetic pulse—they've been working on it. It could explain the computers and phones—but how they could make a pulse that big, I don't know. There wouldn't necessarily be radiation. If it was what they call a neutron bomb, there may be some blow-over, so we'd best stay inside for a day or two. Neutrons are designed to kill the people but not destroy as many buildings—kind of practical. It would stay hot in the target area a few days. But if those flashes were nukes, well then we can all kiss our ass goodbye…"

"Wait a minute," I interrupted. "If it was a nuke, we would have felt a shockwave, wouldn't we? A wind blast. Something by now."

Ben took a guess. "The Blue Ridge stands between here and D.C. It could have deflected the blast."

Willow Ann was angry. "It's not as though we were unaware of this. We were all expecting it. It's the end. It's what Permelia Lyttle said would happen. All the prophecies said it."

"It just doesn't make sense," cried Fleeta, hugging her son and daughter. "It isn't supposed to happen this way."

"I thought we had some time yet," Abigail muttered. "We're supposed to have more time."

I offered comfort. "Prophecies are vague."

Abigail tried to be positive. "A lot of the world's prophecies say go to the mountains—maybe we did at least one thing right."

"My mother. My dad," Tillie sobbed, searching our faces. "All my friends. I wonder if—have they said anything about the U.K.?"

"I have family in White Plains," the lawyer murmured. "Mom. Brothers. My sister and her children—God."

I couldn't stand the sobbing and fear. Our citizens reminded me of the homeless families I'd seen years ago huddled beneath the bridges in D.C. I felt claustrophobic and wanted to run out of there.

Tillie spoke in a small voice. "So what happens now? Did any of you consider that? If this wasn't the end, then what's going to happen next?"

Ben mumbled, "It won't matter at all, then, will it. Nothing will."

We decided to turn in around two in the morning, though Tillie's question haunted sleep. The citizens bedded down wherever they could find space among the looms and storage, in our room and on Tillie's floor.

I knew I wouldn't be sleeping that night. I felt guilty that I had wanted Dunkard Bottom to fail. Now I was worried for every one of them. It was the first time in my life that I felt fatherly. Whether this was the end or not, the world around us had crashed possibly beyond rescue. I wished Abigail, Jason, and I could get out of there. Go back to Belvedere and lock the doors, but the prospect of ever returning to Belvedere never seemed more remote. As for Jason, he got up on the bed and snuggled for protection between Abigail and me. He was all right, but the terror in their eyes troubled me more than anything else that night.

♦♦♦

Next morning, the sleepless citizens lined the storefront windows to witness the first dawn of a frightening new era. We peered over the windowsills as the backlight of day glowed behind the fog. We glanced with the wonder of children to see the familiar shapes of the village slowly emerge in the gray light. A mountain silhouette took form. Nearby trees were still standing. After a while, a beam of sunlight pierced the mist, but daylight revealed nothing out of the ordinary. The buildings stood on their foundations. The dewy gardens and crops were lush. The surrounding trees and hills displayed their shades of greens and early embers of the approaching autumn. We were all present to witness it. All except for Hermes and Mickey, that is.

"Something seems rather odd out there, don't you think?" observed Tillie. "Not cricket."

"We're just scared, that's all," Abigail said optimistically. "It's the same as it was. See?"

But Tillie was right. As the sun burned off the fog, we saw that the sky itself seemed eerie. No clouds, but the air was as dingy as Beijing at rush hour.

"Red sky at morning, sailor take warning," murmured Edwinna bleakly.

"Is that how it goes?"

The Man of Law cleared his throat. "So, what's brown sky at morning?"

We lingered at the windows a while, every one of us wondering if we were drawing our last breaths. We searched each other's faces for reassurance but found only questions. In a moment, we organized ourselves, whispering like mourners at a funeral parlor. But leave it to the teenagers to motivate even the most frightened adults.

Georgie pouted, "I'm starving."

The responses ranged from "We're all hungry" to "Tough," but Jeffey was yanking on Fleeta with the same look in his eye.

We didn't want to, but we thought it best to at least migrate to Anomalies where the food was and where we could check on Hermes and Mickey. But who first? Beecher volunteered. Deciding not to breathe on his way over, he huffed a few deep breaths and burst out the door. We watched in silence as he sprinted across the road and into Anomalies.

Abigail stomped her foot. "An intercom. Why didn't I think of an *intercom?"*

But in a moment, Beecher waved an O.K. from the window. In little groups, we scurried across the street like a skulk of foxes. Jason led the first group. Outside, the air was September damp, pollen spicy, and dim.

Inside, we found Hermes seated at a table by himself munching oatmeal. He barely looked up.

"Hermes! Hermes, are you OK?"

"Was enjoying breakfast. Til just now."

Mickey appeared at the pass-through without any more expression than a chef counting heads.

Abigail had to ask. "Aren't you fazed by what happened last night? You act like nothing happened."

"Something happened, all right. It just doesn't seem like there's much we can do about it."

"Mickey?" Abigail pressed on. "Don't you care at all?"

"What do you want me to do about it? Biscuits?"

Yes, we wanted biscuits.

"I am sick to my stomach, everyone," announced Connor. "What about that?"

Cody huffed. "You get sick to your stomach when somebody looks at you wrong."

Hermes's mouth bunched a bit as he swallowed.

"We lost all the chickens."

"The chickens?" General alarm ended with, "What about the alpacas?"

Hermes sipped some coffee. "I checked on them while y'all were still sleeping. For some reason, the alpacas are all right."

The Man of Law asked, "If the chickens are dead, then why aren't the alpacas? Why aren't we all dead?"

Hermes shrugged. "Our size? The alpacas were in the barn and the chickens exposed to the air. Your guess is as good as mine with this Armageddon bullshit. To me, it's just the lollapalooza of all human fuck-ups."

Fleeta was shaking, but had nothing to say. In a moment, Mickey came out with a plate stacked with warm biscuits and got us focused.

"Breakfast. Eat."

"Mickey, don't you know the world ended last night?"

"No. I don't know that. You're eatin' biscuits. The way I see it, whether we're in heaven or hell—you're eatin' biscuits."

Nothing provoked the woman. We were all on edge as we ate. The Man of Law cleared his throat.

"So the end of the world," he said. "It's happened. Never expected this, though."

Beecher said, "Miss Abigail, I am sorry about the things I said last night. About leaving."

Abigail's mouth hung open with indecision about what to say. "Beecher, I—"

Edwinna watched Abigail and me with something like reverence. "Don't you all realize? Don't you get it? We might all be dead if it weren't for Mr. and Mrs. Flitch."

"If they bombed Washington," Fleeta uttered, "then there's little hope anyone's still alive in Hagerstown, I suppose. My sister—. Thanks, Abby. For this place. For what that's worth."

"It's worth a lot, Fleeta," Abigail responded, gripping Fleeta's shoulder. "A lot."

Willow Ann and Georgie quieted with the realization everyone they had known may be dead.

Edwinna asked, "What about our crops? Are they radioactive now? Did we just lose our food?"

Hermes shared his thinking. "I've been wondering about that myself. First, we need to find out what really happened. We don't know how many other places got hammered, or if we're the only ones left around here. If the shortwave traffic was all but dead last night, all but New Zealand and Holland, then that tells you something right there."

No one spoke for a long moment. Fleeta held her grandchildren close. Tillie and Connor huddled together as did the musicians. Edwinna started

crying again.

"What's the matter with you?" Connor asked. "We're alive, aren't we?"

Ben hugged Edwinna. "Ed's pregnant. We're going to have a baby."

A few voices uttered congratulations. Most of us shut up for a moment. Abigail went over to her and hugged her.

"Don't worry, sweetie," she said. "If it takes a village, then—well, at least you have a village."

I loved my wife's compassion.

Mickey relieved the tension some. "Get 'em while they're hot." She'd made buckwheat pancakes—great pancakes served with little pitchers of warm blackberry syrup from our own berries.

There was no more talk of leaving the village. At least we had power, water, and food to eat, and perhaps a measure of collective autonomy.

Deep into breakfast Beecher repeated that even though it seemed safe outside, we should stay indoors for a couple of days.

"Keep the windows closed, too," he added. "Maybe we should play cards, or something."

Everyone agreed, even Jason, who rested his chin on my leg under the table, as though he'd be extra safe under there.

Hugging Jeffey, Willow Ann asked, "So what do we do now? Does anybody know that?"

But Jeffey had a surprise for us.

"Gram!"

"Sweetie!" Willow Ann hugged him. "You talked!"

Yes, the mute boy who hadn't uttered a word, began to speak.

Fleeta held him. Looked into his eyes. "Say it again. Pretty please?"

"Gram. I'm. Scared."

He buried his face in her shoulder as the rest of us applauded. But that only scared him silent again.

"It's a miracle," Fleeta proclaimed, as Willow Ann and Georgie fawned on the boy.

I couldn't disagree. No one disagreed.

Abigail didn't seem to notice the event of a mute child speaking.

"Well, unless Hermes has a better idea, we can at least scan the radios for news. We need information and should try to make contact."

"Then what?" demanded Edwinna, her voice shaking. "Then what do we do?"

Hermes drained his coffee cup. "Then, if the crops are all right, we keep weeding, farming, and eating. What else? We harvest our gardens and our fields. We start early leaf crops in the greenhouse, plant our winter wheat, and

hope there's going to be a spring."

"Folks. I don't mean to beat the same old drum," Hermes orated, "but we only have a month to harvest everything and do our canning—the way you people have been dragging your feet, a bunch of it will spoil before we can get to it. You have no idea how much work there is. We're going to have to feed ourselves somehow all winter long. We can't run freezers on battery power. Food will rot. Service stations won't be able to pump gasoline, and that'll put the tractor out of commission. We'll have to siphon the cars. I could go on."

"May I say a word?" Fleeta asked. "Don't any of you see the hand of God in this?"

The Man of Law asked her, "In what exactly?— As in the Neocons finally blew up the world, or as in us still being alive?"

"God wanted us to be alive. God brought us here. God saved us."

Mickey grunted from behind the pass-through. "Yeah, you're all real treasures, you are—if God saved you, then why did God let everyone else die? I think it's about time God gets a performance review."

Hermes was irritated. "Look, it wasn't any sort of rational deity that pushed those buttons. The prophets of old didn't need to do much more than look around to see how stupid people were, and know that eventually we'd do ourselves in. God didn't have to lift a finger. All God had to do was sit around in his hydrogen fusion hot tub and wait until we wake up from our own self-created nightmare."

Each in our own way, I think we were all praying that morning. Prayer was recommended in *Permelia Lyttle's Guide,* too, though I myself had never seen much in the way of results from it, except for finding Abigail. I hadn't prayed for Abigail, exactly, but she had been handed to me. Or I had been handed to her.

We hadn't seen the end of strange things that morning. Willow Ann spotted something outside the window.

"Come here, everyone. You've *got* to see this!"

Dreading a compounded tragedy, we approached.

Tillie peeked out. "It's the troll. He's outside, and he's pushing a wheelbarrow."

Before anyone could stop them, Willow Ann and Georgie ran outside. After a few words with the dazed troll, they led him in, straggly hair and all. He was a man. A disoriented one at that. He wore no cape, only ragged and torn old city clothes. He was agog, as though just awakened from sleep. He was neither crooked nor limping.

Georgie laughed. "Look—the wheelbarrow's full of nickels."

The troll seemed pixilated, like Alice entering Wonderland, twitching in disbelief.

"What—happened?" he asked. "What's—the joke? Where am I?"

Abigail asked, "Sir, were you outside when it happened?"

"What is this—place? And who are you?"

"This is Dunkard Bottom," I explained. "We're here to ride out the end of the world. It happened last night, we think. Care to join us?"

"End of the world. Right. End of the world," he mused. He held his hands in front of his eyes and flexed his fingers. He slapped himself in the face and wobbled on his feet.

"It can't be the end. No. I'm still here. I am! I am, therefore I think." He grinned with some unexplained relief. Abruptly, he whipped around and pointed his fingers at Mickey and me.

"You-u-u!" He cackled with urgency. He stiffened, all aghast. "Listen and see!" he yelled. "Harvest the weeds and dance the jig!"

Mad Mickey regarded the man with uncharacteristic empathy. "There's a man needs his pills if I ever saw one."

Edwinna wasn't afraid to put her hand on his shoulder. "What is your name, my friend?"

"Grigny," he enunciated.

"Grig-nee?" Edwinna repeated.

But something puzzled me. I thought sure I'd seen that guy before. With his bad skin and twitchy eyes, I suddenly realized where. Jason, too. My dog walked over to sniff the man, then barked.

"Wait a minute—you're the guy I met at the cabin in the woods."

Two years earlier, Jason and I, along with a shiftless PhD candidate, chased a renegade archaeology professor up I-64 to rescue *Permelia Lyttle's Guide.* We were out behind a truck stop when Jason ran off into the woods. I followed him, and he led me to a cabin where this guy was talking to the fireplace and scrying over the classical snafus of pre-history.

Jason wagged, laid his ears back, and nosed the man's arm over his neck.

"Cabin? Oh—yes, the cabin. This dog—he is familiar. You—you're, Quincy, aren't you?"

"No, he's Jason," a bunch of us corrected.

"Not really," he argued. "He says he prefers Quincy—good boy, Quincy."

I looked into Jason's blue eyes. "He never mentioned that to me." My dog shrugged it off as trivial.

Grigny fell back against the wall. "Well, what happened then? Can any of you tell me?"

Jason left the light work of explanations to us. Grigny's face twisted in

confusion as we explained who we were and what had happened.

"What?"

"How about you?" Abby asked. "Where did you come from? Who are you, anyway?"

"I'm Grigny Rafkin. I'm—almost certain of it."

"Rafkin. What did you do before?"

"I'm from B-B-Baltimore. I worked in—computers."

"So, what exactly were you doing out there, being so mean to everyone, with the turnpike and all?"

"Turnpike?"

"You know. Demanding nickels from everyone, coming and going. Scaring people."

Grigny hid his hands in his pockets, slid to the floor in a simian crouch, and eyed us like we were liars. Having known him as the frightening hooded creature demanding nickels at our north entrance, we were gratified to keep our distance.

Tillie pointed out, "The snapping in the air last night. It seems to have changed Grigny and little Jeffey, too. Does anybody else feel changed? Or healed? Anybody?"

We gave her little more than blank stares.

"Not me," said Hermes. "'Course, I wasn't sick, neither."

"Are you changed, Mrs. Laine?" Abby asked.

Fleeta's face was a map of perplexity. "Changed?" She seemed angry. She felt her arms, her head. "I don't think so." She hollered, "I feel the same as I always do. I haven't changed at all. Not one bit. Not *one damn bit!*"

♦ ♦ ♦

We had awakened to a frightening new reality, and the fact of our survival afforded us little peace. We were nervous and afraid. We knew that the outside world had been cruelly torn apart. Would the international retaliations continue? Would the Snap, as we called it, knock us once again to the ground? And when? Worry shaped our eyes. The jokes were gone right along with our confidence.

And what of the so-called miracles? The Snap seemed to have given Jeffey the power of speech and Grigny his wakefulness. I had been neither healed nor changed, though I did feel more responsible for Abigail, the village, and the villagers, then. Fatherly, even. Returning to Belvedere didn't seem so urgent. I held out my hand flat, and it was steady as a rock.

"Well," I muttered, mostly to myself, "I'm not nervous anymore. Does

that count?"

Abigail inspected my hands as Fleeta Laine continued to mope. It were as though she felt shortchanged somehow. She kept her evil-eye on the Simpson brothers and shrank into the corner away from everyone.

"She thinks God abandoned her," Willow Ann murmured. "She doesn't understand how she could have been left behind. She says it must be some kind of mistake. That we must be unsaved. Or—"

"Or what?" asked Georgie.

"Or we're actually dead but don't realize it."

"That's what I've always thought," I added. "About people in general, I mean. Hermes?"

He shrugged. "Or finally alive."

Georgie squelched a grin. "Willow Ann, I think you're baked."

I contributed what I could. "I once heard a Buddhist priest say that no one is condemned. Everyone is already saved."

"I tried to save," joked the Man of Law, "but then there was the boat. The cottage on Martha's Vineyard, and—"

Thankfully, Beecher cut him off.

"Look, uh. Mister and Miz Flitch. Whatever you all think of us, there's not much point in leaving Dunkard Bottom now. We know the ropes here. I don't know how we'd fare in the towns and cities. It'll be chaos out there without electricity, phones, and the Internet. Credit cards won't work. Traffic signals are likely out, too. I want to stay, if you'll have me."

He nudged Cody, who also seemed to have changed. The attitude had subsided.

"Yeah," he said soberly. "Really. We want to stay."

Abigail smiled. "Of course. And thanks to all of you for being here. We have to do what our leaders refused do—we have to help each other live."

Our radiation holiday notwithstanding, I decided to head over to the apartment to monitor the radios. However, despite my protests, Abigail, Beecher, Georgie, and Willow Ann followed.

Willow Ann switched everything on like an expert.

"You really know your way around radios."

Georgie suppressed a laugh. "You should see her satellite COMMS center at home, Mr. Flitch. Awesome. Her antenna array brought Homeland Security to the house last year—it was so funny when they broke down the—"

"You just shut up about that, Georgie Laine."

We split the radio duties, hunting the airwaves for traffic. Willow Ann scanned the shortwave bands as Hermes and I scanned the ham frequencies.

There was still nothing coming out of the U.K., Western Europe, or East-

ern Canada. Willow Ann found a broadcast in French, which my erudite spouse translated for us. But the reports contradicted, not too different from the news before the Snap. Some reports called the catastrophe the Tech War or World War III.

Beecher observed that all the systems and networks were down. Finance, transportation, and communications systems gone. Utilities were useless. Whatever we had in the bank was now just a ball of mixed up 1s and 0s, and nobody could get to a nickel of it.

"Same with investments. All our—investments. Savings. Stock options. IRAs."

"Our whole digital life is in the Cloud," Ben said. "Whatever that is."

Georgie filled us in. "Server farms, really. If our cell phones are fried, they probably are, too."

"It's what they wanted all along," I smoldered. "First, they took the pensions. The real estate, the investments, and then social security. When we refused to invest in the stock market, they taxed our savings accounts with negative interest."

Abigail whispered, "Luray, please try to be constructive."

Around nine o'clock I finally raised a North American ham operator. He was as glad to hear my voice as we were to hear his.

"Happy day, NX4KC. You're the first operator close to D.C. we've been able to raise. Over."

The broadcaster, Dan Dade, was operating out of Salem, Indiana. He told us that he'd heard from people in the Midwest, but very little from Boston on down to Miami.

"It's all been neutralized or some damn thing, Luray. It makes no sense. Some kind of secret new technology out of the back room. We don't know much about damage, but COMMS is out all through those areas. Have you met up with anyone from—we may as well call it the dark zone? Over."

"Negative on that, Dan. We're not far from D.C., as the microwaved crow flies. The mountains protected us is all we can figure. Over."

A blast of static interrupted, but in a moment, Dan provided a few answers.

"One lonely soul from Roanoke told me that his buddies in Norfolk don't answer. There's a huge military presence down there in Tidewater. He's heard nothing from Raleigh-Durham down to Atlanta, neither. Not a heart beating, at least that knows how to operate a radio. A boy in Chincoteague told me Baltimore and Wilmington are just—on fire. Over."

"They bombed Baltimore, too? Over."

"I don't think so," Dan went sullen. "Wilmington and Baltimore were

near enough to the D.C. blast. Apparently there are survivors in those places. Whatever people are left—they've gone to fighting, looting, and burning everything down. The federal government had an underground version of itself, with their special subways out into Maryland, and such. You'd think somebody would have thought to bring along a ham radio. Over."

Beecher mumbled, "Maybe they did."

We listened intently as Dan told us of other contacts he'd made around the Midwest and Southwest. He also said the West Coast was as dark as the East Coast.

I asked, "Does anybody know who started it? Over."

"Best I understand it all mouse-clicked along in rapid succession while Congress argued about who'd get the contracts to study it. China gave marching orders to the central banks. It seems China had an endgame with all that heavy investing in our debt—who knew? The only nukes we know about were in the Middle East. Same old Israel-Palestine bullshit—they used them on each other, or something. Someone missed and Iran jumped into the game. Anyway, Jerusalem and Tehran are just—gone. You might say everyone started it, quite some time ago. But I have to ask you this, Luray Flitch of Dunkard Bottom, Virginia—who gives a shit who started it? It doesn't much matter, now. They neutrinoed the U.K., France, Germany, Italy. The EU's toast, and now it's every man for himself. Over."

"Neutrinoed? Over."

"Hell, I don't know. Whatever 'Tech War' means. Airplanes fell down all over, you know—probably a million people fell out of the sky to their deaths—there's a full menu of tragedy out there. All we have are the appetizers. Over."

"Dan, have you heard anything about radiation? Over."

"Not from anybody I've talked to. One fella at Ohio State says if nukes were used in the Middle East like the rumors say, the stuff's gonna blow on the wind for decades—so a little nuke juice is coming around for everyone to have a sip. People are gonna get mighty sick, depending on where they live. There's nothing much we can do about that. Over."

"What about the Internet? Over."

"Forget it. Phones, too. A guy outside of Beaumont, Texas says the war, if you can call it that, might have started from a software glitch. A virus or a hack or something. Anyways, the atmosphere's so full of crap it's gonna be hard for the sun to shine through—for quite a long time—it's just sad, Luray. It's so goddamn sad…"

Dan Dade broke down, and our tears joined his. We agreed to hail each other every evening at 1900 hours on that frequency and share what we knew.

I logged the main points of our conversation.

Just then, Willow Ann switched on the shortwave speaker. The latest Auckland tape loop reported that government officials had detected no radiation in New Zealand, but confirmed there had been electrostatic bursts in Australia. A broadcast in English from Oslo reported that radiation had not been detected in Scandinavia, but that no one had gotten close enough to the blast sites yet to measure it.

♦ ♦ ♦

That evening, the citizens ate dinner in silence, each of us fearing the worst and counting our personal losses. We felt like we were at a wake for the human race.

A knock at the door broke the spell. Before we could respond, it swung open. In jumped a man in a plaid suit, a three-bell harlequin hat, and a red rubber nose. He sauntered in choreographed steps, his hands in his pockets. His face was alive with jest—his eyes working each of us, throwing us off balance with his presence and misdirecting expressions and hands.

Willow Ann got up before I realized it should have been me that greeted him. The man kissed her hand.

"Mademoiselle." He pulled a gold coin from behind her ear. "Quinn Follett, Village Idiot at your service."

"Come in."

"What do you know? I am in."

He imitated a bonging sound.

"For your safety, all audience members are requested to take their seats at this time."

He shooed Willow Ann back to her seat and approached the group, working the crowd, so to speak, by spreading a fan of playing cards in his hands. He went for Abigail.

"Pick a card, any card."

She chose a card.

To Willow Ann, he riddled, "There's never enough. It's short and it's free. You can spend it and save it. You can have too much of it and you can run out of it. What is it, please?"

Various people guessed rain and money.

He pulled a big cloth clock from somewhere. "The answer is time."

Next he guessed Abigail's card.

"Now give me back my five of diamonds."

"How did you know?" she gawked, blinking her mile-wide peepers. But

she couldn't find the card. "It was in my hand a moment ago."

"But where is it?"

It was under my dinner plate—whoopee—but you should have seen Abigail froth with delight.

"How clever. That is so clever."

His pockets concealed a warehouse of tricks and novelties: disappearing scarves, reappearing flowers, and magic coins. From his lips tumbled an endless stream of riddles, gags, and limericks. I thought the whole thing tiresome, but at least he got our minds off the Snap. The citizens applauded as his eyes darted with false modesty and landed just a little too often upon Mrs. Flitch, whose admiring grin made me, well, queasy.

I interrupted the fanfare.

"Mr. Follett—circumstances have kind of changed since we ran the ad—as you know, the world is—screwed."

Follett sat, his head down like a boy in the principal's office. He took off the hat and rubber nose, and we got a good look at him. He was about forty, with short, thick sandy hair and a freckly masculine face.

The Man of Law hurried me to the point.

"Mr. Follett, you're the first one we've seen."

"Thespian?"

"Outsider. We've seen no one from outside the village before you."

The mirth left his face. He averted his eyes. "Yeah, well maybe you're lucky."

"You know about the war, don't you? You know what happened."

Follett deflated like a coke head brought down.

"Right, the war—the war. You did invite me."

Abigail said, "That was months ago."

"I had to finish my off-Broadway run. I was in a play. A musical comedy based on the *Egyptian Book of the Dead.* When we closed, I couldn't find any other work, so I thought I'd see if you still needed a Village Idiot."

"Sir," pressed the lawyer, "please tell us. What did you see in New York? When it happened."

Follett held his finger on his lips. Showed his dimples to Abigail. Considered a joke but thought better of it.

"Look, the thing is, I'd already left the city when it happened. I was somewhere in the Maryland panhandle when my car shut off and wouldn't start again. Some people gave me a lift but I walked the rest of the way. So I didn't see much. Of anything, really."

We absorbed the man's explanation thoughtfully, when he thought he should inject more information.

"I saw the lightning, though."

"Lightning?" Hermes marveled. "You call that lightning?"

Willow Ann said, "The ham and shortwave say there are whole cities dead out there. You mean you didn't see anything all the way from the Pennsy line? Are you serious?"

He grinned, "That's been my problem all my life."

"What?"

"I *can't* be serious," he brayed, tickling Willow Ann under the chin. "I don't know how to be serious. I crack jokes at funerals." Some laughed as something like sincerity shaped his face. "Once I saw what they did, I just ran."

The man chuckled nervously.

Fleeta cut him off. "All our families are likely dead. Our friends. I don't find that funny, Mr. Follett."

He dialed back the smile. "I-I'm lucky I got here at all. That's all I'm trying to say. Can you tell me? Tell me what you know?"

We explained everything we knew to Mr. Follett, and he seemed by turns saddened and surprised, resting his chin on stacked fists, and fitfully bouncing his knee. We told him he could stay if he was willing to help with the gardens, and he seemed relieved. We put him up in the fourth schoolhouse room.

I was kind of uncomfortable with how Abigail had taken to him. I didn't like the guy at all.

♦ ♦ ♦

We remained inside the next morning as well and felt some relief that the brown sky haze was lightening toward a rosy tint. With no data on radiation, we had little choice but heed the call of the crops. We didn't have time to wait for blue skies, so work proceeded with equal measures of aggravation and bickering. Everyone labored except Edwinna, whose belly had begun to show. To protect her from possible radiation, we assigned her to the kitchen. Georgie joked that Edwinna was the new Eve and Ben the new Adam.

We'd barely started working when travelers arrived. The caravan of five old luggage-laden cars circled like the wagon trains of old. The haggard drivers were stressed and road-weary. Beecher and Georgie stepped up first.

After they cleared them, they waved us over. The Man of Law and I approached the lead car. The driver stepped out from behind the wheel. He was rugged and nearly my height. They were as distrustful of us as we were of them. He showed his hands.

"We aren't here to hurt anyone. We're just hungry and out of gas."

"O.K.," I said tentatively. "We're safe if you are."

He reached his hand out to me.

"I'm Blake Hagerty. You're the first town we've seen with live people in it."

Another man got out of a car, a skinny, painfully self-conscious fellow who filled his lungs to appear bigger. He introduced himself as Brill. The rest of his party stumbled out of their cars, sweaty and stiff, their eyes haunted, searching our faces. There were sixteen in all, including Hagerty's three daughters, three other children of various ages, and two babies. The men hadn't shaved in days.

Hagerty said, "We left Manassas days ago."

Normally that would have been an hour's drive.

"Manassas—just about ground zero," Beecher observed.

Hagerty continued, "We haven't eaten because we're afraid of radiation."

My generous wife stepped up before I could caution her.

She smiled. "We've got good well water here—come in. We'll give you a drink and something to eat."

The refugees from suburbia drifted into Anomalies as the other curious villagers peered around buildings or looked up from their slavish labors to see what was going on.

Abby and I entered Anomalies and searched the kitchen for water jugs. She instructed Mickey to make food for them, which the chef grumbled about. She commenced to chopping, but not without a lecture.

"You good Samaritans just remember—the lunch I give them today is a lunch you don't get tomorrow."

"Are we that low on food?"

"Abby," I whispered, "we can't really afford to feed all these people."

"Well, how can we refuse them? They have kids. Babies."

I had no hope of winning that argument. I just didn't know how many others might be just minutes behind them.

Our visitors were grateful for the food and water. Mrs. Hagerty cleaned up the babies' faces. Hagerty gave us the first report from what Dan Dade had called the "Dark Zone."

His blue eyes blinked apologetically.

"Where we lived—you couldn't count the dead. It was our neighbors and friends." He exhaled a breath of fortitude. "The blast—it killed everyone who wasn't somehow protected. Our family—we were in the basement. We used to go down there evenings to play ping pong and watch movies and such. The basement had no windows, so I guess it protected us. But next day or so, survivors started getting sick."

His wife Amanda was quiet but her eyes sparked with intelligence. She squeezed her youngest, a girl of about six.

"The poor things were crawling from door to door, begging for help," she said. "But you didn't dare let them in."

Hagerty gave his wife an impatient glance and continued.

"They were in real agony. They were tearing at their bodies and begging for bullets. In a couple of days, the street was quiet again. Thousands fell dead alongside the ones killed outright in the blast. The streets and yards looked like dead bodies had just rained from the sky."

Amanda shuddered. "And the horrible smell."

Hagerty continued, "Our boy Bobby was out with friends when it happened. Them and their goddamn cruising," he seethed. "We waited as long as we could, but he didn't come home. We still don't know whether he's alive or dead—everybody here lost someone."

An older couple wept. The lady said, "My poor mom and dad. They were in their eighties."

A man named Pratt wept. "All around Dulles and National—crashed planes. Anyone who was in the air is dead now. Everything crashed. We had to walk over bodies in the church parking lot. It was a carpet of the dead."

Hagerty continued, "Those who survived started breaking into houses and stores. Then they got mean—cruel like you can't imagine. And they weren't gang bangers, either. They were people who had made something of themselves. People you'd never think capable of—"

His face twisted, he was unable to continue. Abby asked them how they got away, and Amanda answered.

"We locked ourselves in. We waited for the officials to come. We waited for anything—a radio broadcast. A bulletin from FEMA. The police, National Guard, anyone in authority. But nobody came. The radios were silent. By the fourth day, we planned to escape at night—we had to escape from our own damn neighborhood. But our cars wouldn't start. We left on foot, sneaking through backyards. On the road, we met Mr. Pratt, who was driving this old Buick."

Pratt spoke like an expert. "Nothing with electronic ignition works. Nothing after 1972."

Hagerty continued. "We had to get away from the District so we tried Route 50, but it was clogged with dead cars and gunfights. We tried I-66—you don't want to go anywhere near the interstates. You wouldn't believe what they're doing out there."

Pratt spoke the words one at a time, barely above a whisper. "They trapped a whole family inside their car and—set them on fire. Just set them on fire

for fun."

Quinn Follett, who had told us nothing about what he'd seen, sat by himself at a distance, picking at skin on his hand.

Amanda Hagerty continued, "We made it here on the side roads through the country and over the mountains."

A woman in a hairdresser's smock warned, "A lot of other people got that idea now. Some of the country roads aren't safe either."

Hagerty had more on his mind. "People are raiding vintage car museums. Farms. They're driving tractors, motorcycles, pick-ups, and lawn mowers. Cars from the sixties. But they took off without gas, cuz you can't get gas—there's no electricity. Assholes with automatic weapons are setting up roadblocks and taking whatever they want. You're the first people we've seen who weren't aiming to—"

By then, all our people had come in to listen. Jeffey helped Abigail and me serve the food. Mad Mickey kept on cooking, and eventually put out lunch, her face all smug with you-just-wait-and-see.

A heavy-set woman comforted a cranky baby. "We was on our way to Illinois, but we're riding on fumes now."

Always looking to increase the labor force, Hermes threw out an offer.

"We have some room, but not much," he said. "You folks seem like good people. We can't accommodate all of you because of the food problem. But if some of you want to stay."

"We're grateful for your kindness," Pratt explained. "But we—most of us—want to be in the Midwest by this time next week."

Another said, "You may as well know. A mad exodus is at your doorstep. The thing is, all we really need is some gas."

"Momma?" It was the eldest Hagerty' daughter, Jennifer, a confident girl of about fifteen. "What about us?"

Her mother tucked the girl's sweep of dark brown hair behind her ear. "Quiet, Jen."

"Momma—I've got a feeling. The others have places to go, but we really don't. We don't have anywhere to go."

Abigail and I exchanged glances. Abby said, "Mr. and Mrs. Hagerty, we have two rooms—enough for you and your daughters. If you like our way of doing things, you'd be welcome to stay on."

The Hagerty family went back outside to look around and talk, while the others brought up the subject of gas again.

"I think we can get you some gas," I told them. "But that's about the only thing we can get you."

We emptied our gas cans into their tanks and drained a few of our own

cars. Within the hour, the travelers had finished eating, changed the babies' diapers, and messed up the bathrooms. They were eager to get back on the road. In the meantime, Hagerty approached me. I pegged him at around fifty years of age, his face craggy from working outside.

"Mr. Flitch, my wife and daughter are right. We don't have any place to go, and if you need our help, we could use a place to stay."

Abigail and I welcomed them. In the meantime, they gave their car to the travelers, two families of whom had been crowded into a single car.

The Simpson boys emptied our remaining cans of gasoline into their tanks, and we said our good-byes. Within minutes, the caravan drove off. In the meantime, we cleaned up the mess at Anomalies and welcomed the Hagertys. Blake was a high-steel worker in Philadelphia, and Amanda was a Montessori school teacher. Teenage daughter Jennifer was mature for her age, and they had a scrutinizing eight-year-old named Claire. Their youngest, Rosemary, age six, they called Bump from a family joke that had stuck since before she was born. The family moved into the remaining two rooms at the schoolhouse, and Dunkard Bottom was full. The caravan left behind something else, too. An Edison Victrola and three boxes of old 78 rpm records, which we moved into a corner in Anomalies.

By the time the caravan left, it was late afternoon. Most of the villagers were still hanging around Anomalies content to watch Follett perform card tricks. However, Beecher had other things on his mind.

"Excuse me, everyone," he ventured. "But we have another urgent problem. Those people that came today were friendly. But we are not prepared for anyone who isn't."

Cody cleared his throat. "They're killing people out there for fun."

The Man of Law scoffed at the whole thing. "We collectively made this bed all on our own, and now we're sleeping in it. People are dangerous and greedy. They always were—it's just that now there's no law enforcement."

"We've got to work the gardens," I said, "But we also need to protect ourselves. We have to do what everyone else is doing. We should be looting, too—making night raids on sporting goods stores and Snap houses."

Hagerty raised a finger. "I did a little breaking and entering as a kid. Nothing big."

Amanda recoiled, "You never told me that."

In one of our first votes as a community, monitored for fair practices by the Man of Law, it was unanimous.

♦ ♦ ♦

At breakfast the next morning, a few of us planned to go out and "borrow" whatever we could from the local mom-and-pop grocery and other stores. Before we could organize ourselves, however, a comment from Jeffey woke us all up.

Employing his newfound power of speech, the boy asked, "Mrs. Flitch? Are Davey and Becky okay?"

No one had given a thought to checking on our Amish neighbors. We hadn't exactly become close friends with them, though we had been trading with them and milling their grain.

"That's it, then," declared my magisterial wife, embarrassed at our thoughtlessness. "First, we check on the Schmids and the Vogts."

We thought we might take one of the SUVs, and appointed a delegation—Beecher, Cody, Quinn Follett, and me—but Abigail lobbied for inclusion.

"I want to go, too, Luray."

"Abby, we don't know what we're going to find out there."

A majority of the citizens murmured that Abigail shouldn't go at all.

Fleeta wasn't without her practical side. "If something happens to Luray, we'll still have you."

"Thanks a lot."

But Abby was flattered. "You mean you need me?"

Abby protested a moment longer but got outvoted, which was perhaps the first civil referendum of any kind in Dunkard Bottom.

"Motion carried," pronounced the Man of Law.

"Oh, all right," she fumed. "I'll stay. But Luray, you be careful."

"Careful's my middle name."

But Follett also objected. "Hey guys, I was just thinking—maybe I'd better sit this one out, too. Keep the home fires burning and protect the ladies."

Beecher stood nose-to-nose with the man. "Get in the car, Quinn. Saddle up. Now."

But Quinn backed away. "So sorry, Mr. Rambo, sir—but I'm not going out there. Some very bad scoundrels are on the loose out there."

"I thought you said you didn't see anything on your way here."

"That's right. I didn't. Exactly," he countered, licking his lips nervously. "But it would stand to reason criminals could be around." His eyes on Abigail, he sidled toward her. "I won't go, so you can forget it."

I believe the rest of us shared the same opinion about Quinn Follett.

"Georgie?"

The stocky boy sought every opportunity to prove he was a man.

"Count me in."

I got behind the wheel of the SUV, and Beecher sat up front with me. Cody

and Georgie sat in back. Beecher revealed a Glock pistol in his belt.

"Just in case."

"So, the village has a gun," I noted facetiously. "You might have told us about that."

A grin broke across his face for the first time since he came to Dunkard Bottom. "We should do a security inventory the minute we get back."

Of course. I turned the key, but—nothing.

Beecher cursed. "It's like they said. The Snap fried all the electronic ignition."

"Our radios work," Abigail said, hovering at the driver's window with clingy worry about her husband. "Why not our cars?"

"The radios weren't outside."

Hermes was the only one laughing. "Looks like we outsmarted ourselves with computer-operated cars, too."

I was getting edgy. The only vehicles that would start were the tractor and the Rolls.

"The Rolls it is, then."

"You be careful with that, mister!" Abby scolded. "Not one scratch!"

Jason wanted to go, too. He jumped in, but I persuaded him to stay behind and protect the village. With a disappointed whine, he jumped out and sat, accusingly at me.

"It's all right, boy. We'll be careful."

But he barked twice for no.

We loaded the empty gas cans and portable generator, and set off into the not-so-brave new world to see what we could see.

♦ ♦ ♦

That was the morning the old Dodge pick-up nearly crashed into us. It was the morning we discovered the fields of dead horses and cattle, and found the Schmid family lying dead on the ground. Every turn in the road revealed a new wonder. A new horror. We passed houses burned to the ground, their blackened chimneys pointing skyward. We passed the smoking wreckage of a Boeing 737 that had fallen out of the sky. After our grim discovery at the Schmids, we dreaded finding Axel Vogt and his family dead, too. But they had been good neighbors, and we had to know the truth.

Still a mile from their farm, we spotted another fire. Beecher turned up a gravel road to get us within eyeshot. It was a small private jet. Nothing to be done. No one said a word.

Our approach to the Vogt farm brought into view the colorful hex sign

circles on the barn. The fields, kitchen garden, and fences were meticulously in order. Nothing burned. Georgie noticed something else.

"Look—their cattle are alive. Maybe they are, too."

We parked the Rolls beneath a wide old maple tree, and were relieved to see several long-dressed, bonneted girls pinning blue clothes to a clothesline.

This time, Cody stayed in the car.

Thankfully, Mr. Vogt came out onto the porch. The big man lifted his bearded chin with dignity. He looked down his nose expectantly.

"What brings you here, Mr. Flitch—and company?"

Just inside the door were another man and two older boys wiping tears.

I was still intimidated by Vogt's stolid bearing.

"Mr. Vogt, I hope you'll forgive us."

"Forgive thee for what, Mr. Flitch?"

"After the Snap, we didn't even think of coming to check on you."

"We didn't check on you either, so call us even." The stern man quivered with controlled emotion. "Snap…is that its name? We witnessed lightning in the windows. Twice, we heard the hammer of God. Is that your meaning?"

I said, "We just wanted to know if everyone was all right," before I realized what a stupid statement it was.

The man lowered his eyes. Heroically tempering the tone of his voice. "We remain alive, but far from all right. Three farms west of here—Naumann, Lapp, and Hahn—all dead, and their livestock, too. And Schmid. The Schmids are the last to bury—we were leaving just now to do so."

I explained to Mr. Vogt that the Snap hit cities all over the world. That the flashes were from bombs set off in Washington D.C. in a terrible war that apparently had lasted only a few minutes.

Oddly, the news didn't come as much of a surprise. He glanced upward in gratitude, composed himself, and invited us in.

"I offer condolences for the loss of your capital."

When my eyes adjusted to the dark interior of the house, I saw a woman at the stove. Mr. Vogt introduced his wife, Constance, who nodded with a prim smile while avoiding eye contact.

Mr. Vogt reflected. "The Almighty in his wisdom has allowed evil men to magnify their folly and reveal themselves for who they are. And so His mighty plan unfolds. "

Georgie said, "We're sorry about your neighbors and friends. We have solar panels for electricity—I guess you're making do without them."

Mr. Vogt and his wife exchanged glances. His bushy brows rose in the closest expression to amusement I'd ever seen on his face. Suddenly the obvious leapt out at us. The fireplaces. The oil lanterns.

"We have shunned such contrivances—ever since they were invented."

"Oh, right."

Georgie laughed out loud. "Shit I never thought of that."

"Sorry."

"Forgive us, Mr. Vogt," I muttered. "We're laughing at ourselves. The Snap hasn't changed the way you live like it has for us. It appears that we could learn from you."

"Imagine that."

Mrs. Vogt offered us slices of wet-bottom shoo-fly pie, which we gladly accepted. It was so good, we would later agree not to mention it to Mickey. After we ate, a generous Mr. Vogt agreed to trade us a few bushels of their wheat and jars for our apples and preserves.

Before we left, Cody asked in amazement, "Sir, with your neighbors gone, how is it that your place was spared?"

"How shall we fathom the will of the Lord?"

Beecher shaded his eyes and noted the closeness of the farm to a ridge just east and another north.

"Mr. Vogt's farm must be close enough to the mountain for the blast to pass over them, like it did us," Cody explained. "Those other farms were out in the open."

Beecher and Georgie returned to the car, but before following them, I caught Mr. Vogt's attention.

"Respectfully, sir, there may be dangerous people headed this way from the cities with an eye for stealing and mayhem. I wanted to warn you to take precautions."

"Thank you for your kind intent, Mr. Flitch, but the Lord has protected us. We shall follow his example," he said, eyeing a shotgun over the mantel, "and protect ourselves as well."

No one spoke as we drove down the long driveway, but Cody was still trying to cope. His voice shook.

"This is so bad. Are we going to die? Tomorrow? Or the next day?"

No one could answer it. We still didn't know anything about the radiation. We were waiting like everyone else for the sickness that Dan Dade assured us would one day come.

"The tank's nearly empty. We'd better find some gas."

♦ ♦ ♦

By mid-afternoon, the whole sky had turned an eerie pink color, and we gazed in wonder how it flattened the appearance of the landscape. At least

we encountered no people before finding ourselves at the general store and gas station we'd used before the Snap. It was closed as expected. We broke windows to get inside. On the shelves, we found meat and fresh food rotting from no refrigeration, but Hagerty started boxing up canned goods, boxed foods, and bags of raw beans and rice. One might assume that in an Amish valley, no one was out stealing, and the city refugees hadn't gotten here yet. It would be our gain.

Out in the hot rosy daylight, we'd be exposed, so we parked the Rolls in back until we got the pump working. We weren't worried about being caught thieving—more about meeting up with worse thieves than we were.

We lugged the generator into the garage and up close to the breaker box. We figured that as the old-fashioned system didn't use computers, it was simply a matter of connecting the cables to the main breaker terminals. Georgie identified the pump circuit, and Beecher fashioned a plug and cable from a now-useless garage machine.

With a mighty yank on the pull rope, the generator blasted to life, too loud for my comfort. We switched on the pumps while Cody pulled the Rolls around front to fill 'er up. As Abigail's jalopy was a hybrid conversion, the tank only held eight gallons. We also filled the empty cans we'd brought.

However, to our collective dismay, a blue '57 Ford Fairlane rattled in behind us, loaded to the gunnels with luggage and boxes. A distracted and near-sighted driver squinted through his bifocals. He had splotchy pink skin and bad jitters.

"They open?"

"They're having a sale," grumbled Hagerty.

In a child's seat beside him was a baby who couldn't have been a year old. We didn't want his car to be visible out there out in the open while his tank filled, but we couldn't very well refuse him. Once our gas cans and the Rolls were filled, Georgie drove it around back. Cody filled the man's tank as we watched the road.

While we waited, I asked him where he was from.

"Philly suburbs," the man said. "You can't go north—don't even think about it." He lamely gave the baby's toes a shake. That's when I noticed that the baby was far from okay. It was a sickly baby, almost scarlet blue in color. He barely had enough life in him to cry. If he hadn't been mewling, I would have thought him dead already.

"Mister, that baby doesn't look good."

Watching our eyes, he sipped from a half empty pint of vodka.

"Mind your own fucking business. He's fine," he smiled. He redoubled a tight smile. "I'm taking him to his mother."

I saw no baby supplies in the car, no bottles or formula. The man's grin was tense with fear.

"I'll give ya a word of advice," he said, pulling a pint of vodka from under the seat. "We thought we had trouble with gangs before. But now the gangs look like you and me. They wear expensive watches, matching neckties. White shirts with the sleeves cut off. *Bastards.* Who ever thought we'd become our own terrorists, huh? Who ever thought that. You wanna drink? Drinks are on the house. From now on, I guess."

Cody had been listening, his eyes fixed with compassion on the baby.

"Say mister, why don't you let us take care of that baby for you. Our village women know all about babies."

"This is my son," the man insisted, all paranoid. "Just because the world fell apart doesn't mean you can take a man's baby."

Cody yelled into the rear window, "You're shit-faced, buddy—and he looks awful red."

"He's right," I said, trying to help. "The baby looks bad, mister. Please."

I approached the driver's door as Cody went to the passenger's, but the man was enraged.

"Mind your own damn business. He's goin' to be with his mother in an hour or two."

"Buddy, that baby isn't going to last two hours."

"Are you a pediatrician?"

After he filled the man's tank, Cody ran around to the front passenger window and reached inside to grab the baby, but the man yanked the gear shift and floored it. The car flung Cody to the ground, nearly taking off his arm. The car roared crazily down the road. Cody got to his feet and threw a chunk of concrete at the car. It was the first time I saw the young man passionate about anything but getting stoned and goofing off.

"That baby's gonna die," he hollered. "Your son is going to die!"

We all felt horrible about the baby, but it was now urgent for us to get out of there. We loaded the generator and cable into the Rolls and headed south, where we knew there to be a gun shop.

For twenty tense minutes, we navigated the curvy chicane of valley roads without seeing a soul. The gun shop was abandoned and empty—not one gun, shell, or bullet to be found. Just a life-size cutout of a bikini-clad model holding a AK-47: "Ideal for home defense."

"There's a Walmart," Cody said, "five miles down."

"How do you know there's a Walmart?" Beecher insisted, but the young man only shrugged.

Disgruntled that we'd be away from Dunkard Bottom even longer, I went

along with it. Fifteen minutes later, we came to the top of a hill. The approach curved downward around an outcropping of naked rock with a view of the store down below. I pulled to a stop, and we observed what was going on down there.

As usual, Walmart was busy, but the doors had been broken open and people were running in and out with armloads of stuff as gunfire punctured the air.

I made an observation. "One little global disaster, and no one parks in their designated spaces anymore."

In the chaos, people were carrying away flat-screen TVs, golf clubs, toys, bicycles, shotguns in boxes, fishing rods, car radios, camping gear, clothes, snap-together furniture, and throw rugs.

"There's no electricity." Beecher spit out the window. "Idiots."

"I'm not going down there," I told them. "No way."

They agreed. We didn't need to borrow trouble, so we headed back.

Few of us spoke as we watched out for people on the road. The shock of finding the Schmid family dead and being unable to help the sick baby played on our minds.

"We should have taken that baby," Cody cursed himself. "I should have stuck the gun in his ear, and just taken it. Mr. Flitch. Why didn't we take it?"

"We didn't move fast enough," Hagerty lamented, trying to ward off a wave of guilt. "I don't know. I wish we had."

Beecher said, "From now on, we'd best only leave the village in parties of four. And we have to find more weapons. It's a priority."

Returning to Dunkard Bottom by a different route, we saw the wreckage of two more airliners. The airspace overhead had always been a route for west-bound air traffic from the D.C. airports, so it wasn't surprising. Then over the next hill, we saw the oddest sight. It was a kiddie train ride from an amusement park, its cartoon-painted cars bearing elderly, sick-looking people. A young nurse was driving, her knees protruding out the sides. She had a pistol, and waved us on, a look of terror on her face.

"What the hell?" said Georgie.

"She's trying to save them. Can't be more than twenty."

Beecher shook his head. After they had passed, he said, "All she had was only a squirt gun."

We arrived home without further incident and unhappily reported the solemn news of the plane crashes, of farm families dead, cattle and horses lying on their sides like toys, and a world that was nothing like it used to be.

"The Vogts are all right," Beecher stated flatly. "The Schmids are all—well, they didn't make it."

The now talking Jeffey searched our eyes in disbelief. "Davey? Becky?"

The Schmid children had been his only friends outside the village. We each wept in our own way over the loss.

♦ ♦ ♦

We would commence securing the entrances to the village just as soon as we harvested the peppers and fall cold crops. We made Beecher our chief of security, and he would keep our only pistol within reach. If we saw anyone approaching, tell Beecher—we drilled the children on this so there would be no confusion.

Beecher laid out a plan. Being situated in a hollow, we were protected on two sides by mountain ridges. The riverbank was shrouded by thick woods that also hid the mill and crop acres from view. Blockading the roads would be simple. We would build blinds of brush, grasses, mountain laurel, and saplings. We would cover the remaining pavement with leaf litter and dirt to create a false shoulder. Simple. And we would begin as soon as the picking was done, which took most of the following day.

Heavy black storm clouds and a violent wind chased us inside Anomalies for an early supper that day. Tillie and Connor had abstained from dinner in order to work. Jason hated rain, so he chose to stay with the alpacas in the barn.

By the end of dinner, the windows were dark and rain banged the roof—it the first violent thunderstorm since the Snap. Every one of us had radiation on our minds, but we were all the more surprised when headlights flared across Anomalies' windows. I was in the battery room looking through the curtain to see an old Land Rover and a Jeepster park out front. Four men got out and staggered drunk in the rain. These were not weary families seeking food and water. They looked like weekend golfers who had slept in their clothes. Thing was, they weren't carrying golf clubs.

"Damn it." Beecher flayed his fingers toward the room. "They have guns."

I wish I could say they were red necks, gang bangers, or bad kids, but they were the loose-necktie loungers you'd find in any sports bar in America on a Friday after work.

In a moment, the door flung open and the men were inside dripping on the floor. The biggest guy had round shoulders and a red flattop. In high school, he might have been a linebacker. He was holding an assault rifle under his arm. Beecher played it cool, planting both elbows on the table as he assessed their weapons. One man fondled a black pistol, though the other two had no weapons that I could see. I couldn't decide whether to leave the battery room

and go out there or preserve some element of surprise. Either way, I had no weapons and no plan.

"I'll be damned—we just landed in Mayberry, RFD," bellowed the linebacker, tipping a beer bottle to his lips. "Only it's not on the map," he laughed in utter fascination. "What is this place?"

Amanda Hagerty, the alert and precise schoolteacher, spoke for the dumbfounded rest of us.

"This is Dunkard Bottom, gentlemen. An experimental community set up to survive the end of the world."

"The end of the world?"

The pistol guy had a square, Mediterranean-looking face. He was eating pistachios. "Well it isn't quite the end yet, honey, though for you it may come sooner than later. We'll have Miss Ingersoll send a memo around." He tapped his forehead. "Wait, we can't—" he guffawed. "Miss Ingersoll wore out and died on us. Pity."

The men laughed. Abigail trembled.

The linebacker had a new idea.

"In the meantime, suppose everybody line up against that wall. Mustn't tarry now. Hands on our heads."

They did as they were told. I didn't know what Beecher had done with his pistol, but both hands were free.

"Weapons? Anybody holding a pistol, gun, knife, rocket launcher, guillotine, or anything that could do us harm? Hmm?"

The fact of only one pistol in the village played on my mind. We had not succeeded in finding additional weapons. We'd also failed to hide the village in time. The villagers tried not to look at Beecher so as not to draw attention to him.

The little guy without a gun patted each one down and found nothing until he came to Beecher, who had tucked the pistol into a pocket in his cargo pants. He was wise in not trying to shoot the intruders.

"Look, boss man." The man slipped the gun from the pocket.

"Ooo—cute little Glock," shined the pistol man. "Dibs."

Hagerty couldn't hold back any longer. "Look, what do you assholes want? We've got nothing here."

With his eyes on Hagerty, the pistol man said, "Okay, Stevie. You can have the Glock. But step aside while I make this brief PowerPoint presentation on the risks of disrespect."

The pistol man went up to Hagerty, hauled back his fist to hit him, but instead punched Fleeta Laine hard in the face. He punched her so hard, her head bounced off the wall. She dropped to the floor shrieking and holding her

face. Much as I wanted to run out there and be a hero, I could see no advantage to it. For now, I stayed where I was.

Willow Ann and Georgie tried to help. *"Gram—Gram—"*

The man feigned apology. "Oops."

Hagerty stooped beside her. "What kind of animal are you?"

Willow Ann shouted, "An animal would never do that."

The other men laughed as Fleeta held her bleeding head.

"Bad aim?" he asked rhetorically. "Not really. Just remember that from now on, whatever you do to one, you really do to someone else."

The fourth man, a pudgy bald guy around forty, said, "Why don't some of you nice people help that crybaby lady into a chair—can't help thinking that little face lift was an improvement—and then you can all sit down."

The adults were stiff with fear as the children cried. Willow Ann and Georgie attended to their grandmother, dabbing blood from her hair. Quinn had been quiet. He slumped to the floor behind everyone else. Still hidden behind the door, I was seriously perplexed. For the moment, I stayed put, but not because of planning. Fact was, my belt loop was hooked on a nail in the wall. Maybe it was just as well they found Beecher's gun—he couldn't have taken all four of them out at once. He couldn't outgun an automatic rifle.

The pistol man had the physique of a part-time gym rat and blinked his eyes a lot. He wore expensive shoes and wrinkled slacks and shirt. He aimed the pistol now, looking down the barrel at every face, as though taking inventory.

He stopped at Willow Ann and grinned.

"You, honey—come on down." He sighed theatrically about some new chore. "Yup—it looks like we're gonna need the J.D., Stevie. Be a good boy and go out and get it."

Stevie was a nervous guy in black-rimmed glasses and Walmart couture. The pistol man exhaled impatiently. Confused as to his intentions, Willow Ann awkwardly shuffled to the other side of the room.

"And from the appetizer menu." He eyed young Jennifer Hagerty. "You, too—mm-hmm— Cinderella. Come on down." Scared pale, she joined Willow Ann, the poor kid wondering what kind of game this was going to be.

Cody Simpson couldn't hide the fury in his face, while Beecher calmly bided his time.

Hagerty half stood up, pointed into pistol man's face. "My daughter is only fourteen. You leave her alone—"

Flat Top fired a burst over Hagerty's head, and the deafening shots paralyzed everyone where they sat and stood and the little kids crying.

"Fourteen?" echoed the red flattop, dimples sinking into his face. He pre-

tended to answer a telephone. "Ring-ring. Hello? Great news—engineering says the specs are pre-approved."

Laughing through his nose, the pistol man wasn't so playful. The look in his eye was nakedly cruel. He hummed casually as he continued to look down the barrel of the gun, face by face. Fleeta was still holding her head, and the man made a sour face, "She'd never hold up. No thank you." He guffawed at Amanda. "'Sides, Stevie's not drunk enough yet."

With Abigail, he hesitated. "This one's a little chilly for my warm heart. Honey, that stare could wither a rose."

Flat Top had an idea.

"Hey! Maybe we could test her out on multitasking. I think the receptionist slot is open."

The intruders guffawed like frat boys.

Stevie returned with a 750 of Jack Daniels. He didn't seem like he belonged with these men.

"Who's shooting?" he asked nervously. "Did somebody shoot?"

Ignoring him, the pistol man was still focused on my wife. "Come on over here, Marion Librarian, and don't make me invite you twice. And you kids quit crying, or there'll be no supper—forever."

Flat Top burst laughed, "Geez. I gotta hand it to you—you are one cold dude. He is so *cold."*

The fourth man had kept to himself all that time, only mildly interested in the selection process, chewing something. They still hadn't noticed me, and my thoughts raced for some kind of heroic ploy, as it didn't appear that any others of us had a plan. I didn't know karate, kickboxing, or kung fu. I didn't have a weapon, and there was nothing within reach that might outperform the guns.

Just then a rain-soaked Mad Mickey swaggered in from the porch with a bowl of greens from the garden. From day one, she didn't care at all about radiation.

The pistol man shouted, "And just who the hell are *you?"*

Without so much as a flinch, Mickey got right in his face and shouted back. "I'm the goddamn *chef*—that's who I am. I just picked these greens for the stew and they're gonna *spoil.* And if you don't start being nice to me, I won't give you any."

"She's a great chef," Quinn pointed out from the dark corner by the Edison Victrola machine, his voice quivering. "She's from Savannah, Georgia. Had a two-star restaurant there."

"Three!"

"I mean three. And she was written up in *Southern Living, Bon Appetit,*

and—"

"You think this is the fucking PTA?" The linebacker brandished his automatic. "O.K. hurry up, Major Pain. Our brainstorming team leader's cooking up something of his own here, and we're going to need our stamina. We haven't had a decent meal since the sky turned pink."

Mickey trudged to the back as though this were any ordinary day.

The quiet man was nearly as big as Flat Top. He wore a red sweater. Seemed more contemplative. Wherever these guys had worked, he was probably the CEO or plant manager. He sipped his beer while examining the musical instruments and the little platform we thought of as a stage. He was eating pistachios and tossing the shells on the floor, each one making Abigail wince at the mess. Pistachio man put two-and-two together and picked Ben and Edwinna out of the group.

"Say—you look like hippies. Do you play?" With a nod, they committed themselves. "Well then play something." He snickered, "Something cheery for a sadistic orgy. *It's My Party and I'll Cry If I Want To."*

"I know." The pistol man got boy-like. "Billy Squier. *Everybody Wants You."*

"You know it?"

Ben and the pregnant Edwinna sneered as they picked up their instruments. Ben nodded a downbeat, and they started. The grindy old Squier tune sounded oddly celestial on banjo and autoharp.

The linebacker and Stevie perched on one of the tables to watch the show while the pistol man aimed his gun at the other villagers.

"Let's see. The itinerary. The itinerary. Yes. We've been traveling on business all day and require some entertainment. So all you moms and dads out there, keep those little tykes quiet." He slipped back into the little boy routine again. Curled his finger under Jeffey chin. "And it'll be handy to remember that we bagged our first widdle brats last week—it wasn't hard at all."

The Pistachio man tossed more shells. "Like eating pistachios. Hard to stop."

Just then, young Claire Hagerty climbed out from under one of the tables.

"Sweetie," Amanda ordered. "Go back under. Go on. Right now."

But Claire didn't do as she was told. She eyed the men, their guns, and the rest of the villagers, set her mouth with determination, and stood by her parents.

The man repeated, "Just like eating pistachios."

"Awww, enough of this shit," hollered the pistol man. "I want to see these fine ladies strip the light fantastic."

The linebacker conducted. "Wholesale bargain-basement booty bumpin'—

do it now."

I tried to attract Quinn's attention, but he was busy inching toward the side door exit. With no other options, our self-conscious ladies took one step toward the center of the room, and I realized that saving them might be up to me. Suddenly, I remembered something Grigny said right after the Snap: "Dance the jig."

I unhooked my pants from the nail and grabbed my derby from the hat rack. With my heart hammering, and my brain out to lunch, I tried to pull off a Quinn, as he was too scared to do it himself. I burst from behind the door. My heart pounded in my ears as I Riverdanced into the room, my clodhopper feet tripping over themselves.

"Ta, ta ta, ta tata-*taahhh!"*

The linebacker recoiled, *"Holy shit."*

"Now just who the *fuck* are you?" hollered the pistol man. "Hold up there Lucky Charms. Where did you come from?"

But I was busy sweating and adding variations to my frenzied act, just to create a distraction. I hoped that appearing crazy might give me an advantage as it had so often in the past.

The pistol man waved his gun with weary disgust. "Whoa, whoa, whoa—bad, bad—man, you are so *bad* at that."

"Who are you?" Flat Top demanded. "Now, stop dancing before I shoot your ass."

I stopped dancing and preempted him.

"What difference does it make who I am? Gimme a pull on that Tennessee sippin' nectar, ya greedy reprobates."

Further bewildering them, I went for the bottle.

The linebacker fired a machine gun burst into the ceiling. "Pay attention, Bojangles—these are real guns."

"All right, all right—have it your way," I hollered, feigning disgust. "I'm just a man who's walked a long way. And I am parched and would be grateful for a sip on that jug—say, dudes, it looks like you have several righteous bitches here."

Abby shot me an incredulous glance.

Amazingly, the man handed me the bottle. I guzzled a big swallow and the burn nearly choked me off. While coughing violently, I caught a glimpse of Mickey making a knife-throwing motion in the pass-through. She gave me a look like, *I could knife one of them.*

But I shook my head in return. Then they'd kill us all. Instead, she loudly banged a frying pan.

Amid such terror, Mickey and I had had a moment.

"The stew's ready, whack jobs," Mickey hollered. She had a way of ordering people that made them instantly obey. "Get it while it's hot or you won't get dessert."

The other citizens had been roundly cowed by machine gun fire. No heroes among them, and I had to credit them with more wisdom than I had. I ran over to the pass-through and gripped a large tureen like a waiter. It seemed only right to help out, but I didn't get far. I placed it on the table.

"Not so fast, Tinkerbell," grumbled pistachio man, who pointed his gun at me. "Over there."

I joined the others as pistachio man pulled another bottle of beer from a bag and opened it on the end of the table, chipping the edge. Despite the danger of the situation, Abigail scolded.

"Look what you *did!* You are chipping my *table!"*

"Sorry. Sorry," he reacted as though scolded by his mother. "I didn't mean it."

The pistol man tasted the stew and his eyes widened.

"Oh, baby! This is better than Olive Garden. Hey, you got balsamic vinegar?"

More than one eyed Mickey for her reaction.

"Sorry, just asking."

As the pistol man spooned more stew into his mouth, he pointed the gun at me.

"Move over there with the others, fruit loop. And you—" He indicated the women. "I want to see some coyote ugly, live on our stage, right here right now."

Our intruders slurped loudly, like dinner theater. Jennifer began shyly dancing, when Willow Ann stopped her.

"Don't bother," she said. "I know what these assholes want. I danced my way through school."

Fleeta cringed in shame for her. "Willow Ann, for God's sake! Can the children leave at least?"

Stevie grinned. "Everybody has to grow up eventually, right boss?"

"Not me. I'm Peter fucking Pan."

Georgie turned his wet eyes to the floor.

Willow Ann danced to that bluegrass rock-n-roll in a way that I'd never have suspected from a radio operator first-class. She'd obviously done this before, and she was good. Not only that, but she was kind of stimulating, and effectively kept those middle-management spring-breakers focused on her undulating curves.

I had done as they ordered, feeling helpless to do much else without en-

dangering everyone. As they got drunker and guzzled their stew, they made eyes at each other, signals for what I knew to be the next disgusting item on their agenda. I only wished something would break for us. We hadn't come this far in Dunkard Bottom to have our lives snuffed out by overgrown schoolboys.

As Willow Ann performed, every beat moved us closer to disaster. But in a moment, I got a high sign from Mickey. The four men finished the last of their stew, and were passing the liquor around. Flat Top told Willow Ann to sit on his lap, which she did. He whispered into her ear.

"Hell, no!" she shouted. "I don't *care* if you went to the Wharton School. You are not doing that to me."

"We'll just see about that."

She punched him in the face. He shoved her to the floor. He took aim, but Cody dove over a table taking Stevie by surprise. They tumbled to the floor where Beecher recovered his pistol. He fired at Flat Top, grazing his shoulder, but by then it was too late. A burst from the automatic and a shot from the pistol man, and Cody lay motionless and bleeding on top of Stevie.

Stevie hollered. "Get him off. Get him off."

Amid screams, Beecher lurched toward them, but Hagerty stopped him.

"Beecher, no! *No!"*

As Stevie got to his feet, he picked up the Glock once again.

"You ass! You stupid ass!"

Beecher fell to his knees beside his brother. "Cody! Man!"

Ben and Edwinna stopped playing. Willow Ann approached Cody.

But Cody wasn't the only one who fell. Six-year-old Bump slid down the wall to the floor. Blood spurted from her neck, slowing with dwindling heartbeats.

"Rosemary, oh, God no!" Amanda screamed. Blake and Jen moved toward the child, but the man shot into the ceiling.

"Nobody grieves until I say so."

Blood spread across Bump's chest, and Claire darted to the floor beside her.

"Rosie. Get up, get up!"

Amanda collected Claire, sobbing, in her arms.

Hagerty hollered, "You shot our baby you coward motherfucker." He made a move to attack the men, but another burst from the machine gun cowed him.

Abigail's face bleached white. "You killed this little girl. You shot her."

The man fired his gun again. "You see, lil' darlins, we simply don't care. There's no more police. No military. We've been waiting for this opportunity

since our frat days."

Pistachio man smiled, "It's fun."

Barely finding her voice, Willow Ann wept, "You killed Cody, too." She launched herself at the man pounding him with her fists. "Look what you did!"

"Why you screechin' scrawny bitch!"

He threw her to the floor. However, she got to her knees, hauled back and socked him hard in the groin. The pistol man smacked Willow Ann's head, and she rolled against a chair. Enraged, he strafed the wall as citizens dove for cover.

"Shut up, all of you! Let that teach you hometown heroes a lesson. One man's already been downsized, and it was completely unnecessary." The domestic terrorist seemed dizzy. He teetered on his feet. "No more—heroics. All you—unlucky souls need to do is figure out the order—in which we sacrifice you to Saint John Barleycorn."

But something caught his eye. He fired a burst toward the door. Apparently Follett had used the commotion to try to sneak out.

"Get back here, Poindexter," he commanded, "or we'll start, you know, cutting pieces off ya and stuff."

Follett strained a smile. "No problem-o. Happy to do it."

I pleaded, "Look, you can't just kill your way across the country."

Pistachio man shrugged, "Why not?"

"Because someone better prepared than we are is eventually going to stop you."

"Killing shmilling," he replied. "Mass shootings have been market driven since the 2000 Coup." The pistachio man laughed. Without warning, however, he lurched forward as though the world had shifted on its axis.

"Whoa! Reality check. Is this room tipping over?"

He glanced affectionately at Willow Ann and guffawed, "Take a memo, ballbuster—. Whoa!" He laughed harder. He convulsed with laughter. He fell down on his butt laughing. "Wait. Wait—watch this." He wobbled to his feet and tried to pirouette. Looking at me, he implored, "Wait—how'd that go again?"

After a few Riverdance steps worse than mine, he gave up. However, Stevie leaned toward him shyly.

"May I have this dance?"

Flat Top laid down his machine gun and bowed to Stevie. Without prompting, Ben reached over to the Victrola and lowered the needle on Patty Page's *The Tennessee Waltz.* The citizens stood mystified, but as long as they weren't shooting at us, it was a big plus. Pistachio man took Ben's microphone and

serenaded them like a bride and groom. He crooned with a bell-tone clear tenor voice.

I was dancing'
With my darlin'
To the Tennessee Waltz...

As Stevie and the linebacker waltzed, the pistol man slowly sank to the floor as though asleep. A moment later, Stevie grabbed his head and fell forward. The linebacker let him slide out of his arms. He shook his own head clear and raised his weapon.

"What the hell's going on here?"

Pistachio man laid his head on his hands at the table like a kindergarten child.

The linebacker took a stance. "I'll kill you all! Tell me what you fuckers did? Right now."

All he got from the citizens was a blank stare.

He grabbed me by the collar and pointed muzzle at my nose.

"Tell me what's going on or I perforate Mr. Bean here."

Abigail screamed, "Stop! No! Leave him alone."

But just then, Jason leapt in the front doorway, his hackles up, growling.

"Looks like a dead dog to me," Stevie slurred, seeming quite drunk. "Does that look like a dead dog to you?"

Teeth bared, Jason suddenly leapt across the room.

"Jason no!" I hollered.

The man swung the muzzle away from me and toward my dog. Another burst of bullets missed Jason as he sprang, catching the man's arm in his teeth. The machine gun fell to the floor and the man sank back against a table. He kicked Jason in the chest, sending him rolling. My dog was getting up just as the man grabbed his weapon again.

"No, Jason, no!"

But suddenly, and without explanation, the man lurched forward as though the world had shifted on its axis.

"Where is that mutt?" he seethed. "I'll kill that goddamn dog." I held Jason's collar as he strained and bared his teeth.

But the linebacker slid to the floor. He squeezed one more burst into the ceiling and collapsed.

Every one of the attackers now lay unconscious.

Hagerty moved to kick the guns out their reach.

"What the hell happened to them?"

Teenage Jennifer Hagerty angrily cried, "Maybe they grossed themselves

out."

I caught Mickey's grin through the pass-through.

"Quick," I shouted, "tie them tight. We are taking them for a long ride. You kids go over to the schoolhouse and get Miss Tillie. Hurry."

The children ran outside while we tied the men with curtain cords, extension cords, and kitchen twine.

"Taking them for a ride?" seethed Beecher as Jason growled. Beecher grabbed a pistol and pushed the muzzle against the linebacker's head.

"Beecher don't!" Abigail shouted.

Hagerty kicked one of the men in the ribs. "You do two, and I'll do two."

Amanda grabbed his arm. "You do that, and we're no better than they are."

He kicked the linebacker hard in the ribs and turned away to hide his tears.

A few moments later, Connor and Tillie ran in.

"I heard guns, but I was afraid to—" Tillie stopped in horror at Cody's body and all the blood.

"Quick—Cody and the little girl were shot," Beecher pointed.

"Move back," Tillie ordered. "I used to be a nurse."

Abigail remarked, "You never told us that."

Without answering, Tillie looked at Bump first, and her eyes told the story that the child was dead. Cody still had a pulse, but she shook her head.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Simpson will surely die before we can do anything for him."

Amid shouts and cries, Tillie. "These men look like they've been—poisoned."

"Mickey, what did you do?"

She strolled out holding a big ladle on her hip.

"You would have had a nice stew tonight, but instead I used it to dispatch these motherfuckers into orbit. In cooking, a little Jimsonweed goes a long way."

"Jimsonweed?"

"Sure. Grigny gave me the idea."

"Grigny?"

"He said 'Harvest the weeds and dance the jig.' And I guess we did."

Ben breathed, "Creepy. That's downright creepy."

Abigail grabbed my arm as Tillie sadly confirmed that Cody had died.

Abigail and I helped Quinn up.

"Quinn, you all right?"

He heaved a gurgled breath. "Maybe it's time I stopped clowning around."

The villagers stared in disbelief at Cody and Bump. Fact was, we had no

time to grieve. We had to hurry before the invaders woke up.

Despite the possibility of radiation, we ventured outside. At least it had finally stopped raining. However, we also discovered Grigny squatting there, covering his ears, humming, and rocking with his arms around his knees.

"Grigny," I said. "You turned out to be a hero."

"Me?"

"You said 'Harvest the weeds and dance the jig.' You saved us."

He swelled with frustration. "I didn't save you." His face soured into tears. "I didn't save anyone."

I didn't want Grigny to run away again, so I distracted him.

"Here—help us put these men into the cars."

The plan was to drive them so far west that they'd never find their way back. We loaded them into the back of the old Land Rover and cautiously drove about an hour before stopping at a crossroad.

"This looks like a good spot."

Jason barked once for good measure.

We dragged the men to the side of the road and lined them up like big sleeping babies. Abigail regarded the bound men, brooding, not with hatred or anger, but with disbelief.

We kept the vehicles, the guns, the ammo, the liquor, and three cases of beer.

♦ ♦ ♦

The drive home was intense and silent. Whenever we saw lights on the road, we drove dark to avoid being spotted.

I squeezed Abigail's hand.

"Abby, I'm sorry. I should have thought about security long before this."

She wept, "We're about as good at security as we are at farming. Beecher's the only one who thought of it." But something else was on her mind. "Luray, what you did was really stupid."

"What do you mean?"

"Dancing around like that."

She suppressed a smile.

"You mean tripping over my feet—"

"I don't ever want you to take a chance like that again, do you hear me?"

"Blame Grigny. It was his idea."

She mocked, "'Righteous bitches'? Are you *serious?* Luray Flitch you couldn't be cool if your life depended on it—*'dudes'?"*

"It kind of did. The New York City village idiot showed his true colors."

"That's not fair—we were all terrified."

She kissed me. "You helped save us today, and I'm never going to forget it. You big dope."

Scanning the pitch darkness, Blake Hagerty seemed nervous. He pointed toward the winks of distant fires.

"Would you folks mind if we hurry it up a bit? We really need to get off the road."

A stone-faced Beecher revealed no feelings over the loss of his brother. He simply turned his face away and stared out the passenger window.

Eight

That Sadie Hawkins Thing

THE MURDERS OF CODY AND BUMP had delivered the global catastrophe to our door. On our minds was how narrowly we had thwarted the terrorists' unthinkable plans for Jennifer and the badly bruised Fleeta and Willow Ann. We had defeated the attackers, but we had won little more than our lives. We should have been prepared for such an invasion.

Next morning, we buried Cody Simpson and Rosemary Hagerty in the cemetery beneath the willows. Fleeta Laine, her face still purple and swollen, wept pitifully as we dug. Nothing about the end of the world was as she had envisioned it, though it metaphorically matched the prophecies she held dear. We all shared a sense of collective blame for what had happened to us.

Fleeta read Psalm 23 while the grieving Willow Ann barely had the strength to grip Beecher's arm. What a pair they were, she with the black bruises of hard punches to her face, and his war-hardened eyes slack and incredulous that his brother was gone. As for Quinn Follett, he hung back among the willow tresses scrutinizing our eyes for ill will. Abigail wept by herself near the Dunkard family plot as though the murders had sealed Dunkard Bottom with irreparable failure. I joined her there and held her as tears wet my neck. Over her shoulder, I could see Grigny's face peering around a tree from across the river. He had been conspicuously absent until after last night's invasion.

Beecher would have no conversation about Cody, nor would he acknowledge our words of sympathy.

"We have to obscure the roads leading in here with trees and brush. Dunkard Bottom—all of us—we need to disappear so we can't be found."

Minutes after we filled in the graves and spoke our words, we got to work hiding Dunkard Bottom from the outside world. Beecher convinced us that a camouflage plan was as vital as an armed defense. More people were driving the roads looking for handouts, places to live, or innocents to prey upon, and we couldn't afford any of it. Charity itself had become a luxury. Everyone pitched in—the devastated Hagertys and Jason, who thought it was great to see us all finally playing with sticks and branches.

In the midst of it, Grigny showed up.

Georgie scoffed, "Sorry, dweeb. Fresh out of nickels."

Willow Ann scolded, "Georgie, *grow up!"*

Grigny's brows peaked. "What are you doing?"

"We're blocking the village from sight."

"What for?"

"In case you didn't know, a quartet of numbskulls invaded us last night," the Man of Law told him. "They killed Cody Simpson and young Rosemary Hagerty."

"It was certainly the end of the world for them," he observed thoughtfully, his eyes twitching as though he were recalculating.

"The end of the world?" he asked no one in particular.

It seemed clear that Grigny was making little more sense transformed than he had while terrorizing the tourists.

I asked him if he'd like to move into the village. "You should live with us. We need to stick together."

"Naw. N-n-no. I couldn't do—but I could be a lookout. If you have walkies. I can see traffic coming from both directions.

"No walkies," muttered Beecher. "But it's a good idea. Cell phones are useless."

The reformed troll had cleaned up well, though he remained an enigma. He'd bathed and shaved, and Jennifer had given him a serviceable haircut. He turned out to be an attractive man in his early thirties. Many tried to talk with him, but few could get him to utter more than a few words. Ever since the Snap, Connor scrutinized him the way an entomologist might study an exotic bug. Everyone kept their distance.

"Do you miss being a troll?" Willow Ann asked him as they dragged a fallen tree across the road.

The question seemed to mystify him.

"A what?"

I asked, "You don't remember?"

He seemed unaware of his former role.

"You don't remember collecting nickels at the turnpike?" needled the Man of Law.

"All those nickels—is *that* where they came from?"

"You told us you worked in computers before," Willow Ann said. "What did you do, exactly?"

"No," was his simple reply. "Oh, no, no, no."

"What do you mean 'no'?"

"I can't remember that. I don't want to remember that—"

Grigny wiped his eyes as he roughly grabbed some brush for the barri-

cade. He took the lopper and snapped off a sapling at the ground.

Beecher and Grigny finished dressing the north entrance while the rest of us began working on south ingress. At both ends of town we left obscured paths wide enough for our own vehicles to track in and out. Other than that, we had basically sealed ourselves off from the rest of the world. Later that day, Beecher and Georgie took the Jeepster out in search of weapons and also some walkie-talkies.

This was something new for the once intrepid citizens of Dunkard Bottom: we were now officially cut off and alone. A pall of fear lay over us. Not only would no one find us, we had no one to call. No help line. No 911 operator. No police. No helicopter rescues. No city hall. No Richmond. No Washington, D.C. Dunkard Bottom didn't even have a bona fide leader. Collectively, we possessed many skills, but we also swelled with strong opinions. In Beecher, we had a man who knew how to organize our defenses. The Man of Law had his prejudices, but also wisdom in matters of governance. I admit that Abigail and I had reached the end of our capabilities. Until then, it had all been theory and luck. What would we do next? Who had the confidence to lead the village into the brave new post-technological world? We were a society used to a set of rules that had vanished with our wealth.

♦ ♦ ♦

Next morning, as we ventured into the candy-coated world beyond Anomalies, the sky was empty of clouds, but the sun was oppressively hot in the thick humid air. Come rain, shine, or radiation, we had no choice but work the garden and fields. Hermes' warnings about the crops took top priority. We'd lost food to visitors. We'd lost food to neglect. Not only did we have to gather in whatever produce that survived, we would have to preserve it before it spoiled. and no one had experience with canning. We were weeks behind.

The villagers sobered into a state of rolling panic when we realized how much work lay ahead. It seemed the new people, the Hagerty family, caught on quickly. Whether going out to work was a good idea or not, we wouldn't know for days, perhaps weeks, when we'd be on the lookout for anyone feeling sick. All this while we took turns standing guard and communicating with Grigny on the walkies that Georgie and Beecher had found—the stores had been cleaned out for miles around, but they did find a couple of old shotguns in a Snap house.

That's when some new craziness arose. Our solar panels and battery system seemed to be holding up, but cloud cover cut down the amount of power we could generate. We soon discovered that if we were careless at night with

our battery power, a day of sunlight couldn't compensate. On cloudy days, juice wasters found themselves in the dark after sundown and shamed at breakfast the next morning. It rained hard for three days running.

Unfortunately, the Dunkard Bottom villagers were no standard collection of stereotypes in some sci-fi story. If we had been, we'd be dressed in rags, scavenging burned-out buildings, or wandering the roads. Hermes would suddenly remember the Geiger counter he'd brought with him. Connor Miggs would turn out to be a nuclear scientist who could explain everything. We'd have a boy hero, Georgie Laine, who would sleuth around, uncover clues, and save the day. But no. We were a platoon of ordinaries, refugees from suburbia and small-town America beset with the daunting task of self-sufficiency. Gone were the back-ups of money, fuel, and supplies, and not even much of a crop or vegetable garden to rely on. All we had was Abigail's marvelous village and a tool box full of trial-and-error. There would be no one else to blame if we failed.

Despite our apocalyptic angst, Abigail and I realized some things about the people of Dunkard Bottom. The tiny community now shared a common cause of survival, but with an unexpected benefit: because of fresh food and manual labor, we were becoming a community of healthy people living without meat, milk, eggs, or junk food. The young people's skin cleared up, and most admitted to feeling better than ever before. Away from bad food, bad habits, and bad medicine for seven months or so, we were becoming trim, fit people who performed physical work every day and who ate nutritious food, much of which we'd grown ourselves. We hadn't even lost anyone to Mad Mickey's kitchen fits. We had Permelia Lyttle's model down pat—with the Internet a thing of the past. It was simply too late to teach other communities how to do it for themselves. The Dunkard Bottom model would live and die with us, unless someone recorded what we did here: I began writing this chronicle that very night.

♦ ♦ ♦

Memories of the vicious attack never faded. The one thing that neither Permelia Lyttle, nor the other clairvoyants, psychics, nor even the prophets of old warned about the future, was a population of idiots. Poorly educated, misinformed, and prone to violence. And we of Dunkard Bottom were on constant watch. We kept eyes and ears open, scanning the trees, river, and hills for intruders. Listening for engines on the roads. And always the pressure of the food. The citizens became short-tempered. There was no way to phone, email, or Skype home. We had no carrier pigeons, so we worked in the cool damp mornings, isolated, worried, and distracted. My own paranoia

prompted me to snoop, and my stealthy eavesdropping revealed that the state of Dunkard was worse than I thought.

The citizens hit the fields an hour before breakfast, laboring in the cold air with their new set of worries. Abigail had realized her dream, but along with the benefits of nineteenth-century living, we understood the dangers of that century. We were driven by a new sense of urgency. No more slow-poke workers. No more sneaking skinny dips in the river. The pink light persisted. The warmongers had turned the earth itself into an adversary.

The clown Quinn Follett dug potatoes as Fleeta Laine gathered them into bushel baskets. Hermes showed Grigny how to gather acorn squash, and Georgie lugged hay bales with Ben Kramer. Beecher and I muscled flour sacks onto a small wagon at the mill brought them to the kitchen. The children worked, too. They rallied under a vital newfound purpose. Without their help, the community would fail—they were needed for our survival, which was something new for modern kids. Amanda Hagerty and Connor competed to see who could break corn ears off the stalks faster. For some reason, Georgie and Jennifer hated each other. It was all turned-up noses and cold shoulders. Jeffey Laine and Claire Hagerty were content to play, and we all helped to insulate them from terrors real and imagined.

We worked from "can see to can't see," as the old saying went. Our hands calloused over and our faces leathered. You didn't need rose-colored glasses: rose was the new daylight. The colors of nature washed out to pinks, reds, and blacks. The clouds were bruised, pink, purple, and black. Black, too, were red flowers. The once colorful Autumn tree foliage had flattened into shades of gray and black. The cotton candy air rendered our skin tones all the same, like we'd lain on the beach too long or suffered the same fever. The men's faces bristled unshaven and the women scarfed their hair in the sanguine light. The only escape from the pink soup was inside at night where firelight and incandescent bulbs turned us human once again. The nights were blacker than black. The diamonds of the night and their ancient constellations had disappeared. The full moon was merely a dim smudge. The only other light to penetrate the cloak was Venus, a tiny red zit on the face of heaven. How we wished the sky would clear. To see it blue again. To see the colors of approaching fall. We wished a lot of things that first month after the Snap.

"I hope it goes away," young Jennifer once fretted. "The pink."

"I think it will. After a while," Abigail replied with a sigh. "Until then, think of it as *la vie en rose*—the French song."

Abby put her arm around Jennifer and sang.

Quand il me prend dans ses bras

Il me parle tout bas,
Je vois la vie en rose.

"It means 'When he takes me in his arms, he speaks to me softly, I see life in rosy hues."

Jennifer didn't get it.

"It's about love, sweetie. Love changes how we view things."

"That pink might go away in a few thousand years," Hermes commented, but then realized that he'd undermined Abby's encouragement. "Sorry ma'am."

Quinn Follett proved to be something of a problem, at least for me. Despite his cowardly performance during the attack, he had charmed enough people to gain an entourage. He could still charm Abigail and Fleeta when their guard was down, and the kids, of course. The man had a gift for it. But he was moody. At times, he'd irritate you with a bad joke. At other times he wouldn't answer a civil hello.

One morning in the orchard I was helping him and the Man of Law pick apples. The high fruit required the pointy ladders we found stored in the barn rafters. The lawyer would have been unwieldy at ladder's top, so Follett teetered there, reaching for the far ones, one foot on the wrung and the other pirouetting in space for effect.

"You're not looking up my skirt, are you?"

"Har, har," choked the lawyer. "Just pick the apples so we can get out of this candy cane light."

"You have no sense of humor, sir," Quinn chided in the manner of a grand inquisitor. "To the rack with you!"

"And I'm on to you, you oily hustler—I break liars for a living, you know."

"Oily? And this from a Boston ambulance chaser. How now?—*catch."*

"Funny man."

From his ladder perch, Quinn checked the back of his pants.

"Oh dear, am I showing?"

Quinn had not shown his inner coward even once since the attack. He used his performance shtick to dodge questions and diffuse suspicions. I was also tiring of his attention to Abigail.

♦ ♦ ♦

One day, Jason and I were wandering the cornrows and detected rumblings of discord that made me worry about our collective mental health.

"Watch what you're doing," Beecher told Connor. "You weeded a kale."

"Say that again and I'll make you eat it."

**

"You and what army, Teacup?"

Fleeta was working along a row of beans. Working toward her in the adjacent row, Ben lost his temper.

"I've done two rows, Fleeta, and you've only done half a row."

"You're used to—hippie work. I'm being thorough."

"Hippie work?" Ben fleered. "The next one who calls me a hippie goes head-first into the river. I wasn't even born yet, for chrissakes."

Fleeta pointed her trowel at him. "I sure wish Mrs. Flitch had screened for white trash."

Out in the head-high corn, I found Georgie shaking a fist full of weeds at the Man of Law, with Willow Ann and Jeffey standing nearby.

The lawyer complained, "I don't understand why it's so hard. Just what is the—process—here anyway?"

"It's a process that physicists call 'picking weeds,'" Georgie stated flatly.

Georgie had a good head on his shoulders. The boy's face was shaping into manhood, and the change was not lost on Jennifer Hagerty.

The Man of Law groaned in pain. He tried to flick hayseeds off his pleated gray slacks, Italian shoes, and white silk shirt.

"Crops, weeds, what's the difference? I still don't understand why we have to work so hard."

Willow Ann rolled her eyes. "To eat."

The now talkative Jeffey squatted to the ground, pulled up a weed, and twirled it in the lawyer's face.

"Get that thing out of my face," the lawyer demanded. "What's the matter with you?"

Georgie and Willow Ann didn't like the attitude toward their little brother. The boy pulled another weed as though the jurist had not followed the first demonstration.

"Yeah. Sure. Pull the weeds," the lawyer scoffed. "I get it. But these slacks are ultra-lightweight wool—Italian made."

Jeffey rubbed his dirty hands up and down the imported pants leg. He chortled. "Now they're grungy like ours."

He exploded. "Look what you've done. You ruined them!"

Anonymous giggles filtered through the cornfield, and after a moment, the Man of Law dropped to his knees and joined them.

"Eight years of law school and I'm grubbing for my lunch in Dogpatch."

Willow Ann wiped her sweaty forehead. "I hope we're learning that it takes more to put food on the table than 'We'll have the lobster medallions,

and keep the Dom flowing.'"

"Oh—*nyaa, nyaa, nyaa.*"

But the field wasn't the only problem. Tillie and Connor were on the warpath, too. Quinn Follett had every excuse to get out of working. Sore knee, fake flu, hangnails, vertigo. Willow Ann had begun fawning over Beecher, and it seemed to irritate him. She dragged herself around in a funk back and forth to the radios. Abigail and I nearly stopped speaking to each other altogether, retiring to bed at night only to make the beast with two scowls.

♦ ♦ ♦

Snarky comments continued to season the air at Anomalies, but I was reluctant to go autocratic on them. Before long, however, I wished I had. Early that evening after dinner, Abigail and Quinn slipped out the door together. On my gut instinct, or maybe my basic distrust of Quinn, I followed them out into the pink dusk where the jester escorted my wife around the barn side of the store, strutting exaggeratedly like a Who from the Dr. Seuss book, throwing in a skip here and a hop there, amusing my wife into hyper-giggles. In exchange, she self-consciously expounded on the richness of our splendid soil. But there was more—a wink, a squeeze at her waist, or pulling nickels out of her ear and apologetically fixing her hair, etc. Without even an objection, my wife went on to extol the crucifers, the straightness of our carrot rows, and our verdant potato patches. At least they used to be verdant. Sunset pinks inflamed the western sky, the sun itself an angry sty.

"See our lovely paw paws," my wife intoned. "Virginia olives, black walnuts, blackberries, bush raspberries, and touch-me-nots—and despite the pink, doesn't it all smell just divine? I'll bet you didn't have anything like this in New York."

"Well, we had a yellow sun instead of a pink one."

They headed behind the store to the Lyceum, so I tiptoed around front. And there was Quinn, holding both of Abigail's hands as they struck dance poses together. My fragile ticker was thumping in cut-time as they tangoed around the remains of the vandalized armillary.

The world has fallen apart, I thought, and they're dancing. My insides recoiled. I was sweating. I couldn't watch them anymore. I remembered the day I first met Abigail at the séance in Williamsburg. So oddly beautiful. Her big eyes and carved features. She was the love of my life. At least I had one thing to be grateful for that night—she still had her clothes on. Was Quinn luring her away from me? Would naked dancing be next? No, I told myself. Just because the man was charming and talented—hell, I was charming and talented. Sometimes. But then he kissed her hand!

I dragged my fuming self back inside Anomalies for coffee, my knee bouncing like it did before I found the Guide. I sat by myself at one of the long tables, checking my watch and wondering how long the disgusting terpsichorean tryst would last. My imagination ran wild. All I could think of was my Abigail dancing naked in a wide-brimmed hat and elbow-length gloves with the village idiot.

Later that night, back in our apartment, I sat her down and asked, "Is everything all right?"

"You can look around out there and wonder?"

"No I mean between us."

"Why would you ask that?"

"That—Sadie Hawkins thing. At the Lyceum."

"You saw us dancing?"

"Sure I saw. Everybody saw," I lied.

"You were spying! Luray, I never thought you were the jealous type."

"I am not jealous. I just don't like you dancing with anyone but me. It hurts."

She lolled her head like I were some teenager who didn't understand the arithmetic.

"Don't be silly, Luray. Quinn is a dance master. He's giving me advanced lessons, that's all."

♦ ♦ ♦

Not all of the citizens in Dunkard Bottom loved Quinn Follett. The kids enjoyed his antics, of course, but the sensible Hagertys, especially young Jennifer, wanted nothing to with him. We'd all seen Follett's demonstration of cowardice during the attack. Oddly, Fleeta Laine joined Abigail in defending the man. I can provide the example of when she asked him about his home in New York, whether he had people there or an apartment. He pulled the collar of his jacket close around his neck.

"Debt is what I had in New York." he shuddered.

"Where did you live?" I asked. "Exactly? West Side?"

He dodged the question.

"Oh, you know. Around. Playing village idiot way down south in the land of cotton—believe it or not—was my golden parachute."

A few laughed. The only golden parachute for the remnant of humankind was the simple state of being alive. There in Dunkard Bottom we at least had that.

I asked, "You don't care much about the end of the world, do you?"

"I'm an artist. My world ends every time a show closes."

"What a sensitive man," Fleeta cooed. "What a sensitive creative artist."

Fleeta looped her arm inside his arm, which made Georgie gag. That wasn't all that I observed. Fleeta was fiercely jealous whenever Quinn talked with Abigail, so that made two of us. Abigail spent more time with Quinn every day, just not so out in the open. I would find them chatting intently, their hands animated, their eyes alive like two old friends reacquainted. With everything else gone wrong in the world, I was doubly worried about my wife.

It all came to a head early one evening when she and Quinn were conspicuously absent from dinner.

Chewing my food like an automaton, I was distracted by a sweet voice in my ear.

"S'matter, you lose a friend?"

It was Willow Ann Laine, her cheeks flushed from yard work.

"Is it that obvious?"

"You've had a big fat rain cloud over your head all week, complete with lightning bolts."

I squinted above me.

"You are so funny," she squinted. "Hey—me, Georgie, and Beecher are going for a swim later, wanna come?"

"A swim?" I imagined my aging self belly-flopping into the river as the kids swan diving around me. "Thanks. I'll pass. Besides. The river—is pink. And probably toxic by now."

"We don't care," she snorted. "We don't care much about anything anymore, the way things are."

"Yeah, but the rest of us care. You are all assets here. There are no doctors if you get sick."

A lot of people talked that way.

"Mr. Flitch, you have got to loosen up," she ordered, her eye lashes fluttering. "Hey—wanna go out for a walk? Come on."

"Thanks, uh, nah—I must be needed doing something or other, somewhere."

Just then Quinn walked in with my wife, looking winded from another dance lesson. I expected her to sit by me, but she didn't. She didn't even notice me or Willow Ann sitting beside me. No, they sat off by themselves, jabbering away like inmates newly sprung from solitary. I couldn't eat the apple cake Mickey had made for dessert.

Fleeta was fuming with jealousy. "Look at them. It's disgusting. Luray, why don't you do something?"

"Like what?" I responded wistfully. "They're just talking."

"Well, I don't have to tell you what talking leads to. And Miss Abigail is a

married woman. Married to you, in case you've forgotten."

"Gram," whined Willow Ann. "You are so embarrassing."

Fleeta sat back with a smile, leaving me to stew. Frankly, I couldn't watch anymore either.

"Willow Ann, if that walk is still on, I'm feeling restless."

Abigail had not only ignored me, she didn't even notice that I left with the young woman. Well, two could play at this game, I thought. I offered Willow Ann my arm, and we walked out together into the waning rosy twilight.

"Willow's a good name for you."

"Because I'm named after a tree?"

"No, because you're—willowy. Your arms. The way you move—it's like you have no bones."

"That's what my daddy used to say," she laughed, quickly crossing her eyes. "No bones at all. Held together with rubber bands."

We walked past the pottery and up Needful Lane until we found ourselves in the cemetery. I was admiring the tire swing Beecher had hung from a nearby oak when Willow Ann moved closer.

I chuckled good-naturedly and moved away.

"I have my own copy of Permelia Lyttle's Guide, you know," she whispered. "I'll tell you a secret—I made my family come this way just so I could meet you. I wanted to meet the journalist, the legend who found the Guide."

"Legend?" I laughed. "I'm not much of a legend—I found the Guide in an old armoire. I didn't even know its value at the time."

She moved close enough that I could feel her warmth in the humid air. She kissed my cheek.

"Please—don't do that. I'm married, you know."

"Miss Abigail doesn't let that stop her."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what we all see. Between her and Mr. Follett."

Willow Ann lit a joint. Drew on it and offered it to me.

"I haven't smoked pot since college. It never really affected me—"

She exhaled. She jabbed the cold, wet end of the joint to my lips and pinched my nose closed. I inhaled. I exhaled. But the roadside reefer didn't do much. I could have told her it wouldn't.

I pointed out, "Virginia was the only state never to legalize marijuana."

"Do you see any police?"

"No."

"Is there still a Virginia?"

"Couldn't prove it by me. On the other hand, a body of laws has merits, regarding child labor, murder, traffic lights, and alcohol, and you have to be

aware that, traditionally, in lawless societies—"

But instead of hearing my insight, she kissed me softly on the lips.

One might have described me as gaga, but only for a second or two, I swear. Yes, I melted into the warm pillows of Willow Ann's lips. Her hands cupped my face and her lips mesmerized me with delicate micro-movements. At least those were the thoughts in my head, which by then felt two stories high.

"What were we talking about? I had a train of thought—"

"This."

She kissed me again, and something tugged my pants leg. It was Jason.

"Stop, Willow Ann. Don't do that! Abigail could be—"

She pulled away with a tiny smack. Grinning, she giggled, "Okay. But I'll always be able to say I kissed Luray Flitch right in his Dunkard Bottom."

Jason whined with worry. I patted his head.

"But I really hope you won't."

She sobered a bit. Rolled her eyes up at the fading dome of day.

"It would be better if the world ended, you know. Instead of this," she said. "This sucks most grand. What else can we do but grow food and make love?"

"Seems like there should be something wrong with that."

"Like what?"

"Well, we can't allow the moral order to break down."

"Why not?"

"People are killing and raping for the fun of it." We walked a bit more, and Willow Ann avoided the direction of Cody Simpson's grave, already shaggy with burweed and moss. Standing before Elmer Artemus Dunkard's stone, we froze in awkward silence.

Willow Ann stooped to hug Jason around his neck.

"I'll give you one thing," I pontificated. "They didn't have to ruin the air, and the mountains, and the trees, and every other damn thing. It's like they targeted everything beautiful and burned it up in a factory furnace. Who the hell would do that?"

Willow Ann stood and gave me another sweet kiss on the lips.

"Willow Ann no. Don't. You shouldn't do—. I'm married to Abigail, and I—"

"It's the times—Luray. This crazy light. The weed."

"We can't just go jumping our fences because we don't like the atmosphere anymore."

A tear escaped Willow Ann's eye.

"And he's loyal, too."

Jason barked once.

"You are a wonderful man, Luray Flitch. Everyone respects you."

"They do?"

Willow Ann parted the willow fronds and headed back to Anomalies. She left me there catching my breath, exhilarated and stoned. But I was suddenly paranoid about my wife, while also madly craving S'mores. When I myself emerged from beneath the willows, however, Mrs. Flitch was standing before me, rippled and tight-lipped, her arms folded beneath her economical bosom, her chin and lower lip bunched under her nose and her eyes aflame.

"And just what exactly were we doing in there with Pussy Willow?"

Jason turned his head away as though he had seen nothing.

"Abigail—I've never really seen you steamed before."

She bunched up her lips and regarded me with one eye closed.

"Abby, I wasn't doing anything. Willow Ann, she's a Permelia Lyttle groupie, that's all. She threw herself at me. I didn't understand what was happening."

"Oh—you don't understand what lovemaking *was?* Back in the old days, when you *used* to have a partner?"

"Used to?—I just meant I didn't see it coming." I furrowed my brows. "I am embarrassed—and quite frankly I'm furious with that girl. I hope her grandmother gives her a scathing lecture. And Fleeta's just the woman to do it."

"You are a grown man, Luray Flitch, and she's just a kid."

"She's over twenty-one."

"So that's how you justify stalking her. And what about in the garden in the summer?" Abigail looked closely at my eyes. "What's this? Luray—are you—hey, you are *stoned."*

"Stoned, naw. It's late pollen—"

"Yes you are. Your eyes are dark gray, which means pink!"

"Oh, so you're a doctor now?"

"I suppose she forced you to smoke pot, too."

"Well, yes, actually, she did, she—."

"Do you think this is Woodstock? Are you trying to recapture your youth?"

"I never had a youth. And I caught a stomach virus at Woodstock."

"Now the real you comes out. Your true colors."

I mistakenly countered with Quinn.

"Like you're one to talk. Running off with Quinn Follett at all hours."

"All hours? *Running off?"*

"All those arm-in-arm walks through the Hanging Gardens of Dunkard. Exclusive dinner conversations at your private table."

"You can join us any time. All I did was have conversations. You—you were necking with Willow Ann like a pimple-faced teenager—under the willows, no less."

"It's not what it looked like."

"Don't try to get out of this!"

"She kissed me, that's all. I didn't even kiss her back."

Abigail strutted home like an Olympic power walker, me and Jason trailing behind. My dog whined as though to say he tried to warn me.

"Abigail, please."

"Luray I have done nothing wrong with Quinn. He's an actor. We talk about the theater. I restore theaters, you know."

"I've seen you together, Abby," I said. "And I don't like the attention he pays you—touching you all the time. He's a con man. I can see it from a mile away."

"You spied on us?"

"You flaunt it around in front of everyone. They all noticed. People are talking."

"It's just dance lessons, Luray. What's the big deal?"

I pouted. "I thought you were my dance partner."

"That may be okay for you, Mr. four-step-tango. I just wanted to learn more, that's all."

Now, I was pissed.

"Mr. four-step-tango?" I'd almost rather she told me she was having a full-on affair. "I thought I had a pretty good tango. We used to tear up the turf in the backyard."

She said nothing more, content to march me to our apartment like a scolded boy. When we arrived upstairs, she flung my pillow off the bed.

"Maybe you need a night on the couch to think about what you've done, Mr. Flitch."

"We don't have a couch."

"And see if you can scrape some of the lipstick off by morning. If you don't, you'll be sleeping with the alpacas until you're an old man."

"Yeah? See if I care."

That would be the first night I'd slept without Abigail since we married. Abigail invited Jason to join her on the bed, which he did. He curled up beside her.

That hurt. "Thanks, traitor."

All that and more I attributed to Mr. Quinn "Broadway" Follett.

♦ ♦ ♦

I lay on the floor for an hour thinking about how Abigail had defended Quinn and unfairly accused me. It reminded me of how I lost my first wives. The first died a tragic death. The second got lost somewhere in Rock Creek Park pushing a pumpkin around in a shopping cart, and the third swiped our nest egg to take her friends to India. I couldn't stop the Ferris wheel of depressing thoughts, so I gave up on trying to sleep.

Radiation or not, I dressed and slipped out into the shadows of the night for some air. Jason came too, which got him some forgiveness points. Feeling alone and falsely accused, I presently resented everyone and everything in Dunkard Bottom. The buildings, the grounds, those goofy looking alpacas, too. I even resented the pink patch of the moon on the claustrophobic blanket of the night. The air had turned cold.

Out on Needful Lane, Hermes Dill interrupted my misery.

"You out here, too, Hermes?"

"It's the only time I can think."

"I think we'll see first frost come morning."

"Frost. Right."

"Tomorrow, everybody picks apples and beans. We may as well dig the rest of the potatoes."

"No pressure, though."

I must have sounded sarcastic. Hermes shrugged. "Just sayin.' You in a shitty mood Pilgrim?"

"I'm a victim of circumstance."

He hooked his thumbs into his belt loops. "Aren't we all?"

We wandered into the orchard.

Hermes goaded me, "You haven't told me what's botherin' you."

I'd protected my inner workings from scrutiny since childhood, but I had trusted Hermes from the moment I met him.

"It's Abigail. I'm losing her."

Snapping on a palm-sized flashlight, Hermes grabbed an apple off a tree. In the flashlight, the apple was red, the leaves a faded green. "That's news to me."

"She's with Quinn all the time. Says she talks with him about theater. Likes learning new dance steps. Then she gets mad when Willow Ann throws herself at me."

"Been a long time since a young lady threw herself at me," he said. "Would make you damn lucky in my book."

"I didn't invite her to come on to me. She got me stoned and then she kissed me."

"Sir, you do not recognize when life is good."

"I told her no."

"But you didn't stop her either, Pilgrim—you asked her to walk with you. I heard it."

I refused to take the rap for my predicament.

"Granted. But I just want you to know, some days it's hard to rally any enthusiasm for this place."

He patted Jason's head. "That's a conundrum. As for me, this is the best place I've ever lived."

"You don't understand, Hermes. I used to be a respected voice in the international press. I toured with Bush forty-one and both Clinton campaigns. I won the Pulitzer for my novel, *The Maze.* Now look what I've become—a loiterer out here in the sticks. My career was taken away from me without a thank-you, and I haven't written so much as a grocery list since I got here. I'm nothing but a fireman, Hermes. All I do is put out fires in Dunkard Bottom."

"Somebody has to put out the fires. And I'm glad you're here to do it." Hermes snatched another apple off a limb. "They're past ready. I surely do hope we're ready for what's coming."

"Yeah, well the most important person in my life is drifting away. If I lose Abigail, it would be the end of the world for me, I can tell you that."

Hermes didn't speak for a long time. For how cold it was, the air was oddly sweet.

"Love—it's like two dancers in a spin," Hermes told me. "If one lets go, you both hit the wall."

"Yeah, well this one has hit the wall like a large pizza with everything."

"Only one problem."

"What's that?"

"It wasn't her that let go. It was you."

"Aw, no, Hermes. You're wrong on that."

"I've been wrong before."

In the doldrums of self-pity, I had hurts to cherish.

"When I was eighteen, my parents died of alcoholism."

"You had parents?"

"Damn right."

He stashed the apple in his pocket for later. "Lucky, like I said."

"What do you mean, lucky?"

"I was a foundling. It's a polite way of saying a throw-away. And I never married at all. Got close once though. Quite close."

"Mickey, right?" I asked him. "Everyone knows you have a story. You're the mystery hook-up gossip of the village."

He quieted. I heard irritation in his breath.

"Michelline lived on the farm where I worked as a hand. She was just a kid of sixteen—you should have seen her then. Oldest child of six children. Her daddy fell out of the hayloft and broke his back. And her momma—well, she wasn't much help after her twin boys were killed in Vietnam. Something went wrong with her upstairs, I don't know. But Michelline had to take care of all those kids. She did all the cooking and the wash. For them and for the farm labor. She dressed them kids every Sunday and took them to church. Me, I watched from a distance. But I helped when I could. Slipped money into her pocket without her knowing. She was sweet back in the day. She hated cooking, but she had a flair for it. We fell for each other real hard, but then I got drafted. Spent a winter in tropical Quang Tri province. When I got back from 'Nam, they were gone. The house was boarded up. I had no job and no girl and no life—no civilian need for my ammo-carryin' skills. Anyway, I never saw Michelline again until now."

"So, are you two—"

Hermes stiffened. "Yo Pilgrim, we are talkin' about you here."

He chuckled to himself as we stepped back out on the lane. I regarded the village buildings and the bright rhomboids of yellow-lit windows.

"I really just want out of here, Hermes."

"Out of here. But you're the—leader here. The de facto potentate."

"A lotta good that's done—everybody hates each other."

Hermes bunched his lips. "There's no one else, Luray. Miss Abby's an idealist. She expects everyone to be fair and reasonable all on their own. But you know they aren't. It's gotta be you gets everyone pulling together."

We were startled by a scrape in the gravel. Hermes and I squinted in the darkness. A shape emerged. We didn't know whether to run or fight. Hermes' flashlight revealed Grigny, mumbling to himself.

"The once and future troll," Hermes whispered to me. "It might seem like the Snap—snapped him out of it, but I see him out here in the wee hours, arguing like he's fighting with himself."

Grigny approached. He locked eyes with Hermes, and said, "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" I asked him.

"Deeply," said Grigny, tears in his eyes. He regarded Hermes with surprise. "Forgive me plowman."

"Grigny, what the hell are you talking about?"

He shouted at Hermes, "Stay in bed tomorrow, Plowman."

"Not likely," Hermes responded in polite Southern. "There is work to be done, Mr. Gafkin. And we need your help, too, suh."

Grigny got up in my face and turned his head slowly. "I don't like awake

much, Mr. Flitch. I don't like awake."

Hermes shook his head. "Yeah, well, awake or not, work starts at seven."

Grigny walked on by instantly disappearing into the blackness of the night.

"Now, there's a bigger mystery than the end of the world," Hermes grumbled. "He don't like 'awake' much. I guess none of us do."

"What did he mean by 'stay in bed'?"

We contemplated Grigny for a long moment, and I bid Hermes good night. But Hermes wasn't finished with me yet.

"Remember, Pilgrim, you're the big cheese around here. Ain't no other."

♦ ♦ ♦

Next morning, Abigail and I barely looked at each other. I told her about my walk with Hermes and what Grigny said.

"You work in the cornfield today," she said with exaggerated politeness. "And I will work in the kitchen garden with Beecher and Quinn."

A showdown with Quinn seemed inevitable.

Nine

Return to Belvedere

THE VILLAGERS straggled to work the next morning irritable and bored with the monotonous farm labor. As the sun blob oozed toward the zenith, I found myself refereeing a dispute among three distinct squash-picking constituencies.

One faction passed off the Snap as human in origin—just one more snafu from the geniuses of the internationalist brain trust. Another faction were the Permelia Lyttle advocates, praising Abigail's apocalypse project as Applied Prophecy. Still another claimed the Snap was the work of the Supreme Deity.

"The Snap wasn't the end, obviously," Tillie surmised. "The end is still ahead of us. Otherwise, we'd be gone, too."

"Maybe we are gone and just don't know it," Georgie mused, inspiring a breathless gaze from Jennifer Hagerty.

"It has to be the divine hand," Fleeta declared, flinging a worm from an acorn squash.

"How do you know?"

"The Daniel weeks."

Beecher hefted a large pumpkin into a wheelbarrow.

"And just what the hell are the 'Daniel weeks'?"

Abigail and I were still on the outs, but it didn't stop her mental encyclopedia from kicking in.

"In the book of Daniel, the end times occur seventy weeks after the reign of Artaxerxes, in 445 B.C. There's an arithmetic to it—how they interpret a 'Daniel week.' Some say each week equals a Daniel year of 1,440 days, but they disagree on how to count that."

The Man of Law scoffed, "Sounds like solid science to me."

Fleeta sniffed, "I thought I'd be taken up, but look at me? The Master said even He didn't know the time of the end, so how are we supposed to figure it out?"

Hermes cautioned, "Not so fast. A lot of the world's holy books agree about the timing, and the Daniel calculations roughly concur. The Hindu scriptures say this is the end of the Kali Yuga, the last of four 100,000-year

cycles. It's the cycle of collapse and destruction. The Mayan calendar ended back in 2012 and Miss Permelia's book also pinpoints our time. You have to admit it seems more than a coincidence."

"I don't have to admit anything," snipped the Man of Law. "I continually seek one answer to the grandest philosophical question of all: when a pinecone falls in the forest and nobody's there to hear it, who gives a shit?"

I'd hoped that would be the end of the eschatology and the scatalogy, but Tillie wouldn't let it go.

"Whatever the Deity is—some bearded chap on a golden throne or the great big smile in the sky—something greater than we are made the pinecone. And the pine tree from which it fell. And the breeze that blew it where it landed. There are no coincidences, even in the chaos of a windstorm. It's all been written down. It's physics—and we are the pawns of fate. Pure and simple."

The lawyer flung up his hands, "Then it must also be the Diety that schedules my broccoli gas. Here, have some."

Fleeta flexed her back. "It wasn't the First Cause that made you so disgusting, Flanagan. You did that all by yourself."

"He's just bitter," Ben asserted. "After everything we've been through. After what's happened, I think we ought to give each other some slack."

"I hope you don't mind if I bring us back to more mundane things." I tried to defuse the situation. "If we are yet to be wiped out, none of this will matter much. But the First Cause isn't going to pick the squash. If we don't, we die. So we have a lot to do with the destiny thing."

Fleeta gave me an imperious glare. "Is that all you have to say, Mr. Flitch?"

"The world has already ended for a lot of people," I explained. "Your own families. Your world ended when your insurance denied your husband's claim and they took your house. One thing seems clear. The world that the internationalists fabricated is over—they forgot that they needed people to prop them up on their pyramids. Well, that's all over now. And as for us in Dunkard Bottom, we're healthier than we've ever been. We eat good food. And all by our own sweat."

Hermes grumbled under his breath, "Was always true."

That morning in the garden, the citizens agreed to disagree. However, when we went inside for lunch, Quinn Follett wouldn't stop making jokes.

"If our great reward is doin' the backstroke in the rain clouds, I'll take my chances here in Dunkard Bottom."

"You can't rise up unless you repent, my friend," urged Fleeta gently. "Sinners must first repent. Then—"

Mickey hollered out from the kitchen pass-through, "Then I repent in advance for what I'm thinkin' right now."

An impatient Hagerty provoked her. "Maybe the one percent already express-lined it to heaven. And we're stuck here. We have to stay here and pick weeds for the rest of eternity. You are no better than the rest of us."

Amanda gripped his arm. "Blake. Please."

Beecher smiled for the first time in weeks. "Apparently, you didn't make the cut."

More than a few laughed with him. Fleeta brooded. Crossed her arms and shut her mouth.

"I was right all along," laughed the Man of Law. "Dunkard Bottom really is hell on earth."

Connor provoked her about the Bible. "The Guide says, 'In the end, expect the unexpected.' Well, that's what's happened, all right."

Abigail reflected. "The Snap was unexpected. That anyone's still alive is unexpected."

Edwinna observed, "At least we know what Permelia Lyttle meant."

"About what?"

Edwinna quoted Permelia Lyttle: "'Deafened by heaven's torchlight, blinded in thunder.' That was the Snap, all right. The bright flashes—the Snap. And that awful noise."

Willow Ann said, "And what's the isinglass? The Handbook says 'the remnant shall cower in isinglass.'"

"The pink sky!" shouted Edwinna. "The air out there—it's like we're looking into a furnace through a mica lens."

Fleeta yanked the Guide from her daughter's hand and tried to hurl it into the fire, but missed. It woke up Grigny, who had been sitting cross-legged by the firewood. Dunkard Bottom's weirdest citizen picked up the dog-eared volume in wonder, repeating Hermes' words, "'Deafened by heaven's torchlight?' It says that there?"

"That and a lot more," Willow Ann responded. "You lived in Baltimore. You must have heard of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World.*"

"I wasn't told about this. Lyttle? Permelia Lyttle?" The name seemed to infuriate Grigny, who paged timorously through the book, his face twisted in disbelief. "Where did this—come from? Who made this?" Tears trickled from his eyes. "I did not approve this."

Abigail sat down beside him. "Calm down, Grigny. Luray and I published it. The material came from an old diary he found in his uncle's armoire."

Grigny's eyes pleaded fearfully. "Permelia Lyttle?"

The villagers were dumbfounded.

Without understanding, I tried to reassure him. "If it hadn't been for Abigail, the book would never have been published."

"If it hadn't been for Luray, you mean," Abigail corrected me.

"It would have been better," Grigny wept. "I never knew about this. Much better if it didn't."

"If you haven't read the book, how do you know the name Permelia Lyttle."

Grigny lamented, "Permelia Lyttle was my great-great-grandmother."

♦ ♦ ♦

The citizens were aghast, even the nonbelievers.

"Grigny!" Abigail gasped. "Violet Caddy wrote that Permelia had a daughter. Are you descended from Permelia Lyttle's daughter?"

Violet Caddy had been the sometimes-nurse of the psychic diarist in the Women's Lunatic Asylum in New York over a century before. We waited dumbfounded for Grigny to explain. Such a revelation cast the man in a new light.

"Permelia was locked away safe. She was a slave to the empire builders," Grigny explained, still thumbing through the book. "But she had a daughter—Emmaline Caddy, they called her. She was my grandmother."

It took a moment for all that to sink in.

Abby asked gently, "Grigny, you recognized the words in the Guide. 'Deafened by heaven's torchlight.' If you didn't know about the book, how did you know the words?"

"My mother knew those words. And my aunts. I've known them since I was a little boy."

"Wait a minute," I protested. "That manuscript was locked inside an old armoire for decades, until three years ago."

"All I know is I heard it. And more. My mother also had the 'gift' or whatever you call it. I guess I got it, too, though I never used it for anything good. It's been nothing but trouble."

"Trouble?" I interrupted. "If you hadn't said what you said about the weeds and dance, we never would have beaten these middle-management terrorists."

Grigny broke down and sobbed. He threw the Guide again. Willow Ann intercepted it.

"So then, you're a prophet?" the young woman marveled. "A modern-day prophet."

"No," he sobbed. "I am no prophet. Don't you get it? I am a pariah. The worst enemy of humankind for all time. I will be reviled throughout eternity."

"Why?" we demanded, but he wouldn't say.

Tillie closed in. "Grigny. Explain what this means: 'Numb are the children

in synthetic consciousness'?"

"I don't know what that means. How should I know what any of it means?"

Abigail said, "Grigny—when you thought yourself a troll, you said prophetic things. 'You'll be late for judgment day,' you said. You also said, 'the world is already gone.'"

"That's crazy. I don't remember. If I said it, it wasn't yet true. Or it's only true now—I don't know—my head hurts!" Grigny scrabbled his fingers in front of his face. "Stop. You're mixing me all up."

He threw himself forward and lurched out the door mumbling about his cabin. He tripped off the porch and landed face-down on Main Street.

Abigail chased after him. "Grigny, you need to know that the Guide saved our lives here. A lot of us would have been dead without it!"

He ran up Main Street, waving his arms like he was in a bee swarm, "Ahhgghaaa!"

"Grigny!" called Abigail. "Come back! Please come back!"

But he didn't.

"He's awake now," observed Abigail, "But what is he so afraid of?"

I couldn't help but observe. "Whether he's descended from Permelia Lyttle or not, don't you think it's an odd coincidence that he would land here in Dunkard Bottom? He was here before any of us. It's creepy."

"It's also creepy how the Snap healed him. Healed him and Jeffey."

"And Cody," Beecher said. "It changed him. Woke him up, or something."

I had no more answers. Only questions. "Why not anybody else?"

"We all have something that needs healing," observed Amanda Hagerty. "Maybe we were all healed of something and don't even know it yet."

Nobody had an answer for that.

Grigny was the talk of the village on into the following morning. Mostly we talked about how to gain his trust and convince him to tell us more. While the men loaded hay into the loft in the barn, the women chose tools and headed out into the gardens. Not fifteen minutes later, Jennifer ran into the barn screaming.

"Mr. Hermes fell off the tractor! He's stuck under the planter!"

♦ ♦ ♦

When Hermes fell into the machinery, there had been no men around. No one could later explain how three women lifted the thousand-pound machine off the poor man's body and pulled him out from under it. I arrived to find Hermes barely conscious, his eyes flaring in fear. His arm was purple and swollen. His leg was bloody and grotesquely crooked. My old buddy from the Gooseneck Library was hurt so badly I could barely look at him.

"Hermes—man."

Tillie took charge.

"Don't move him. Let me see him." She felt his pulse and examined his injuries.

"Will he be OK?" Connor queried.

Ignoring him, she said, "This is quite beyond us. He needs a hospital. All we have here are—band aids. And I am not joking."

The men got a board under him and carried him to Anomalies, where we laid him on a table.

With his teeth clenched, Hermes wheezed for air, but he was in too much agony to speak. Just then, someone in the back started shoving.

"Out of the way. Make a hole. Move it."

It was Mad Mickey, who had rushed out from the kitchen reeking of onions. She bent over Hermes, her scarred red hands in an urgent frenzy to help without touching him.

"Dammit," she cursed in disbelief. "What the hell did you do to yourself, Gill? You work too hard around here, ya damn fool." Mickey cried, searching our faces. "What are you people gonna do for him?" No one knew. "Help him. What are you standing around for?"

Tillie cleaned him up and dressed the cuts in his face and stopped the bleeding. For bandages, we sacrificed some tee-shirts. Using short pieces of lumber, we immobilized his crushed arm and splinted his leg, though his face bore the excruciation of every jostle.

Tillie warned, "We have to work fast, or he'll go into shock."

Without telephones, we'd have to physically hunt for doctors in nearby towns. However, the same idea struck Abigail and me simultaneously.

"The closest doctors we know of are at my house," Abby said. "They'll be able to help him. They'll have pain meds, too."

It was decided to take Hermes to Belvedere. He couldn't be transported in the Rolls, so we carefully placed the now delirious man in the back of the Land Rover. Tillie agreed to ride in back with him.

I recruited Beecher, but Abigail insisted on going, too.

"You won't be going, Abigail. You're too important."

"Abby you saw what happened here. Those guys that killed Bump and Cody—they thought it was—funny."

She was determined. "It's my house. And this time I won't take no for an answer."

"Mickey?" Abigail extended a hand.

Mickey shook her head.

"I'd just be in the way. You take him. And hurry up."

We carefully loaded Hermes into the back of the Land Rover. Beecher rode shotgun while Abigail rode in the back with Hermes and Tillie. There wasn't much they could do for Hermes: Tillie told us that you can't give water to a shock victim. With a leg injury, you can't elevate the leg. They loosened his clothes, kept him warm, and that was the best they could do.

We headed out into the cotton-candy atmosphere cruising mile after terrifying mile toward Belvedere.

♦ ♦ ♦

We navigated the country roads visually scouring for vehicles. The forests, fields, and valleys looked deceptively peaceful in the pink-tinged air. It wasn't long before we passed some exhausted backpackers trudging along the shoulder. They waved for help, but we could neither afford a delay nor an ambush.

We were astonished at every turn how one farm was devastated, the livestock killed, while the next was spared. Pungent waves of rot and decay forced us to shut the windows. Many more houses had burned to the ground, no doubt from gas stoves left on after the people died.

Travel was tense and tedious. To make matters worse, Abigail chastised herself.

"I can't believe I forgot medical supplies."

"You thought of everything you could," I said in support. "I didn't think of it either."

"No, you didn't. But I was the one who bought the property. I outfitted us with a tractor and tools, but no means of defense. Not even a decent first-aid kit."

"You're an incurable optimist, sweetie," I told my wife, and she gave me the first soft glance since she found me with Willow Ann among the willows. "Stop being so hard on yourself. Come on, we have to concentrate here."

"All I'm saying is that I made mistakes."

"So who didn't?"

"You didn't."

"Of course I did," I countered, getting steamed.

Tillie interrupted. "Would you two quit bickering? You are upsetting Mr. Dill, and we must try to keep him calm."

Just then we spotted a peculiar scene at the curve up ahead. The road was blocked with an antique red fire engine and a contingent of armed men in fatigues and black body armor. A rust-rotted old Lincoln was shuffing down the hill toward us. The roadsides offered no shelter so I pulled over as best I could. Beecher and Georgie cocked rounds into their pistols.

As they approached, we could see that the car was driven by a middle-aged woman in jeans and a flannel shirt. The passenger was a younger woman, hair in dreadlocks and crying.

Beecher leveled his pistol from the passenger window, though the women didn't seem like much of a threat.

The driver showed her hands. "Don't worry. We don't want to hurt anybody."

I yelled over. "We have an injured man here. Why did you stop?"

The driver said, "To tell you to turn back. They were military contractors. Their company thinks they run everything now. They took our food and money. They wouldn't let us through." She cupped the cheek of her companion in her hand. The woman was still crying. "We're headed north, but now we have to go around the long way."

I tried to be helpful.

"We hear north is bad—from Jersey to Boston. You can't get in or out of Manhattan—the barges and ships damaged the bridges. They say you're crazy to go north."

But the woman had other ideas. "Thanks, but we'll mind our own plans just the same."

They turned down a nearby gravel road and vanished northward in a bloom of dust. I heeded their warning and turned around.

Abigail was near to hyperventilating. "Now we have to go the *long way around.* Luray?"

"What?"

"No. Luray, Virginia."

"Oh. Yeah."

"That'll take an hour over the mountains."

Beecher hefted his pistol. "We sure don't want to crash that little mercenary party up there."

Tillie agreed. "Miss Abigail, we'll be of no use to Mr. Dill if we're all dead."

The plan was to pick up the road east of the mountains that would take us to Belvedere. We passed through the Shenandoah Valley, the road barely passable in places due to the abandoned cars and trucks. Mostly we passed people on foot, traveling with bundles and walking sticks, but an occasional vintage vehicle came our way, the occupants not wanting to encounter us any more than we did them. Down past Mount Jackson, something struck the car—*tang.*

"What was that?"

Tang, tonk, *peeer.*

"Bullets," shouted Beecher. "We're taking fire for chrissake."

I steered the car to the shoulder and stopped in the shelter of a bluff. But the bullets continued to hiss and twang through the air above us.

"They're coming from both directions," Beecher worried. He stuck his head and pistol out the window like he was defending a stagecoach.

"Beecher, back inside."

My wife cowered. "Can I ask who's shooting at us?"

Beecher was incredulous. "It's not us they're firing at. They're shooting at each other. About a dozen on each side."

At Beecher's urging, I shifted the Range Rover into gear and continued on down the shoulder. It wasn't long before the shooting was behind us. Just up ahead, however, was a historical marker for the Battle of New Market.

"They're fighting on the New Market battlefield, for cryin' out loud."

"We've always been our own worst enemy," I observed. "Always have been."

We turned east toward Luray and the valley that would take us to Abigail's beloved Belvedere. Without further violence, we found our turn, snaked to the other side of the mountains without incident, and were soon on our way north again through hugging hollows, along the river, and through tree-canopied stretches of country road now littered with black-and-white fall leaves whose colors we could only imagine. But there were also the dead cars. Three dead people. The wing of a jetliner protruding into view from below the guard rail. Some areas were so ripe with the stench of rotting bodies, we relished the wooded areas and the relief they brought. Hermes had either fallen asleep or had passed out, but Tillie insisted that he was still alive.

♦ ♦ ♦

As we approached the Belvedere driveway, we were encouraged to find the road free of corpses, though the remains of a traffic jam littered the shoulders in both directions. At the driveway entrance, Abby asked me to check the mailbox. But there was no mailbox.

She stretched her neck. "It's gone?" Her lips bumped into a frown. "My mailbox is gone."

We rolled slowly up the driveway where we expected a line of people waiting for Dr. Palmer and his team, but the driveway was empty of people. So was the yard, which was knee-high with grass and cluttered with trash and fallen branches.

"Oh no!"

I followed Abby's gaze. The house looked abandoned. The doors were open, windows smashed out, but worst of all, the kitchen side was black and

burnt from fire.

"Ohh—*my beautiful house!*"

Abigail whimpered like a child. My heart broke for her and myself, too, for that marvelous self-sustaining house had been our own little paradise. For all we knew, someone might still be inside.

I grabbed a shotgun, and we were soon wading through knee-high grass. Inside, the floors were a waste dump of medical bandages, cigarette butts, food, trash, beer cans, and liquor bottles. Furniture was stained and ripped and bullet holes riddled the walls and ceilings. The Rosetti and Waterhouse paintings had been maliciously slashed and defaced with felt marker. Aghast at the condition, we explored the ground floor, but I made Abigail and Tillie wait downstairs while Beecher and I checked upstairs.

The front bedrooms were disgusting. They smelled of urine, with mattresses stained and falling off their box springs. In one of the back bedrooms, the stink of rotting flesh was overwhelming. Then I spotted a pair of naked feet protruding from the bathroom. We approached carefully, only to see that it was Dr. Campbell, one of the doctors to whom Abigail had given the keys. He had a fist-size hole in his chest. The stench seared the nostrils. I dragged bed sheets over him.

Tillie and Abigail rounded the corner.

"I told you to stay downstairs," I ordered.

Abby recoiled. "Who is that?"

I told her, and Tillie looked closely.

Beecher picked up a blackened meth pipe. "They cut his heart out."

We were less prepared for what we found in the tub. Lying naked and motionless was one of the nurses, but she had not died quickly. Her feet were burned. Choking on the horror, Tillie ranted, "Is this what they call a party in America now—*party, party, party.*"

I gagged and closed the door.

"Let's hurry up. We've got to get out of here."

Before we returned downstairs, Abigail and I observed the yard. The sculpture gallery looked like the ruins of a Greek temple. The heads of the sculptures had been shot off. Abby's art studio was little more than a charred foundation.

"Oh, no." Abby's tears flowed unabated. "How could people do such things to this beautiful place?"

Beecher groused, "They ruined the whole world, didn't they?"

We feverishly searched the house for medicine and anything else we could use to help Hermes, but apparently all the doctors had either been killed or had fled. We did find a medical bag without much inside it. We also checked

the basement for canned goods or anything we could use back at Dunkard Bottom. What we found down there was beyond stupid. They'd shot the canned goods for what looked like target practice.

"Those brainless morons."

Beecher let out a facetious laugh. "They shot the goddamn food."

Abigail was growing impatient. "Come on, Luray, let's go. This is scaring me."

Some of the cans had not been touched, so we filled a box. Once back upstairs, however, we heard a noise coming from the laundry room.

Beecher ordered the women, "You two—take this box and go out to the car."

Abby refused. "I am not going anywhere without you."

I shrugged at Beecher, and he gripped his gun two-handed. "Whoever you are, you better come out. I have a gun."

The voice quivered. "Pal-mer. Palmer."

"Come on out. We won't hurt you."

I told him we were the owners of the house, but he didn't make a sound. I cracked open the door only to find Dr. Palmer on the floor, leaning against the cupboards, a bloody shirt tied around his middle.

Tillie knelt beside him to determine his injuries as Abigail dampened a cloth and filled a cup of water from the sink.

Tillie gave him a sip. "He's been shot."

He managed, "A bullet in my chest—it's still in there."

"They broke my arm," he wheezed. "Took turns jumping on it to hear the sound."

"How long have you been here?"

"They left two days ago, I think." Dr. Palmer was too weak to move.

"If you—could have seen what they did. You can't imagine what they—"

Tillie ignored him. "If we try to move him, it could kill him."

Abby said, "Well, we can't just leave you here."

"I'm sorry. It looks like I've added significantly to your problems."

We traded glances. Yes, he had. Tillie tried to clean up the doctor while explained what happened there during the Snap.

"We were asleep when it happened. The next day, nobody showed up for treatment, so Dr. Campbell drove out to a garage near here. The man told us what he knew, so we decided to wait it out here." He sipped some water and nearly choked. "Those killers—three skinny meth heads and their tattooed bitch of a mother. She was the worst. They used our elderly patients for shooting practice, made them toddle back and forth in the grass and picked them off one by one. They were so terrified—" He had to compose himself.

"They were going to use this house as a base, until one of them set fire to the kitchen. You'll find more bodies out there in the grass. There are bodies everywhere. Did you find Nurse Katelyn? Is she all right?"

No one answered.

Despite his injuries, Dr. Palmer listened as Tillie described Hermes' condition. He told us what we already knew—that the man needed a hospital. At least he gave her specific advice about how best to keep Hermes alive.

Dr. Palmer reddened with strain, "You have to do one thing before you go. You have to move me outside."

Tillie protested. "The bullet in your chest—"

"I'll be all right. I'm a doctor, and I'm telling you that I refuse to die in this goddamn laundry room."

Beecher gripped him under one shoulder and I under the other. Georgie lifted his legs. We gently slid him out from behind the furnace and over to the stairs. But when we laid him down again on the porch, Abigail gasped.

"Oh my. I think he's dead."

Beecher confirmed it. "He is dead."

"Oh no!" Abby screamed. "We killed him by moving him—just like we said."

Tillie sighed with resignation. "He did that on purpose, the dear. He knew we couldn't help him, but he didn't want to slowly starve to death, either. Who could blame him?"

"Please," Abigail cried. "I don't want to be here anymore. Can we just go?"

Tillie collected the bag and a few medicines and we returned to the car. We had a dark new perspective on our country and its travelers. Every stranger was a potential killer. Every car a threat.

Our situation grew worse by the minute. Hermes needed a hospital, but we couldn't take the time to hunt for the nearest working hospital. The probability of Hermes dying was on our minds as I pulled back out onto the road.

A mile or two later, Hermes awakened with a moan and only foggy awareness. Tillie laid it out for him.

"Hermes, I'm afraid we've failed you. The doctors here—have been killed. There are no doctors or hospitals that we can take you to. We have to make do."

"You tryin' to tell me I'm homeless again?"

"No, dear. We'll take care of you the best we can. I'm afraid the outcome depends on how well you can bear up."

"That'll be good enough, Miss Tillie. I am much obliged for the tryin'."

We encouraged him without much promise in our voices, and in a moment

he fell asleep. I turned my attention to Abigail, who hadn't stopped weeping.

"Abby, I am so sorry about Belvedere."

"Luray, if we had stayed at Belvedere—we would be the ones dead now. You know that, don't you?"

Her words were slow to sink in. Of course. The killers would have found us instead. In an instant, I was inexplicably aware of my breathing, the blinking of my eyes and the pounding in my chest. I had breath and life, but only because of Abigail's crazy, impractical idea of buying a village for the end of the world.

"Thank you, Abby."

I gripped her hand and she smiled. We white-knuckled our way back home, wondering what we would find when we got there. We didn't want to take the long way around again, but we couldn't risk running into any killers. We had weapons, but it wouldn't take much to out-gun us.

♦ ♦ ♦

A few tense miles later, we came to a crossroad more upscale than seemed to fit the surrounding farmland. On one corner was a sleek modern gas station with two corpses rotting beside the pumps. Another corner was occupied by a fast-food shop, its windows smashed out, and on the third corner a chain drugstore stood. The store had already been broken into, but for Hermes' sake, I pulled around to the side. I thought it prudent to send Beecher in with Tillie.

Abigail and I waited for an agonizing hour, squirming in the cool October air. I scanned the sky. Not a cloud. But something more.

"Still no birds. Not one bird flying."

"They'll come back, Luray," she said, halfheartedly hopeful. "They have to come back."

In the distance I could see a lone farmer mowing hay as if nothing had changed.

Suddenly we heard a thunderous roar. Undulating toward us, barely under control, was a huge earth mover on giant rubber tires. It swayed and bounced, and only as it passed did I see the that pan was filled with furniture and about a half dozen people—whatever works. They either had not seen us or didn't care.

A few moments later, Tillie and Beecher returned with a brown box heavy with drugs, bandages, and other supplies. Tillie had found reason to laugh.

"Mostly what's missing are make-up, cigarettes, and drugs. Teenagers, one might imagine. We found medical supplies, and luckily they missed some painkillers."

She quickly hung a drip bag from a clothes hook above Hermes and got an IV running. Into the bag she injected some morphine, and a few moments later, he relaxed a bit. Tillie had also wisely swiped some heavy cardboard splints that worked better than the scrap lumber we'd used. We knew that Hermes would never get the surgery he needed.

Tillie continued to work in the back of the bus as a dense fog descended over the landscape—a fog so dense, it captured us in darkness. So, the drive home was silent, terrifying, and intense. With Belvedere gone, I knew that Dunkard Bottom would be home from then.

Ten

A Well-Regulated Militia

BY THE TIME WE RETURNED to Dunkard Bottom, the fog had abated. We were collectively relieved that Abigail's dream hadn't been overrun with travelers, needy or barbaric. The buildings still stood on their foundations and the orchard was heavy with apples. Jason had rounded up his alpacas and was escorting them into the barn.

We enlisted the men to help move Hermes into the schoolhouse, where Tillie commandeered one of the first-floor bedrooms to use as a clinic. We later gathered in Anomalies to give them our report. Follett seemed oddly disinterested in what we had to say. He hung back in the corner, poking at a tooth with his tongue.

"My house is—ruined," Abigail wept. "Burned. They shot the doctors and used the old people for target practice. And a nurse—they hurt her so badly—"

The Hagertys were the only ones not shocked by what we'd seen. We told Mickey the truth about Hermes's condition.

"Hermes needs surgery," I added, "but there's nowhere to take him."

Mickey hurried over to the schoolhouse. As she left, Grigny quietly glided in and sat himself on the floor near the Victrola.

Edwinna asked Abigail, "Did you bring any food?"

"A few cans," Beecher scoffed. "They shot most of the food. Shot the cans right through, the stupid bastards."

Describing Belvedere sickened me, and the story had Amanda and Fleeta hugging their children close. Edwinna, now five months along, held her belly as though to protect her baby from the truth.

The Man of Law crooked a crick from his neck.

"Which again proves the maxim that you can't mix stupid with guns and alcohol."

Abigail wept into her hands. What had happened at Belvedere finally overwhelmed her. I stood behind her and squeezed her shoulders. The realities of our not-so-brave new world were grave indeed. We had not only lost the beauty of our world, but we'd lost our safety as well.

Amanda Hagerty's cheeks rounded. "If there's anything we can do to help. We want to help, if we can."

I thanked her. "We have to do what Hermes would tell us to do. And that's work and get ready for winter."

Edwinna wiped her eyes and whispered quietly. "Did anyone else see the full moon last night?"

Not many had seen it.

"I saw the moon," mused Hagerty, the crags of his squint lines fanning from his eyes. "It was red. Like blood. There's something in the Bible about that."

Fleeta explained. "It's from Joel. 'The sun shall be turned into darkness and the moon into blood before the great and terrible day of the Lord come.' Jesus quoted Joel, too. The sun would be darkened and the moon would not give her light. Also that the stars would fall from heaven. You can't see the stars anymore. Not even on a clear night."

The quotations described the post-Snap sun and moon, all right.

Fleeta scoured our faces for permission to continue. "There's something else. Jesus said, 'two men will be in the field: one will be taken and the other left. Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and the other left.'"

"It explains dead farms beside living farms," Willow Ann observed. "Some neighbors alive and others dead. Fascinating—it's literal and not literal at the same time, and darned if the Guide didn't nail it, too."

Grigny suddenly grabbed his head.

"Stop! *Just stop it!*"

No one knew what had angered Grigny, and as we tried to make him explain, he buried his head between his knees and rocked in some kind of personal hell.

♦ ♦ ♦

Two weeks passed without much excitement. On one of their gas runs, the boys picked up a wheelchair to move Hermes around. Once a day, someone would wheel him from Tillie's schoolhouse dispensary up to Anomalies, where Hagerty and Beecher had built a ramp. We all spoiled Hermes. It was clear how much they all loved him. He was still in pain, his leg mangled, but between the pills and his stubbornness, he wanted to oversee the work.

One morning, Jason and I were out in the lane filling holes with gravel when the alert border collie hackled up and growled. I followed his gaze to a bearded face peering around the trunk of a tree. The man was on our side of the roadside barrier—he shouldn't have even known we were there. With

our encounter with the middle-management terrorists still fresh, I went on full alert. Jeffey was nearby, so I whispered, "Go get Beecher and Georgie, quick."

Jason barked and bared his teeth.

"Lie down, Jase. Lie down."

Jason laid down by my feet, and I tried a casual country approach with the man.

"Howdy, stranger," I greeted him with a smile. "Friend or foe?"

He said nothing, but I could now see him better. He wore hunting cammies and was chewing a plug of tobacco.

"Do you need some water?" I asked. "I can give you water."

No response. Behind me, boots scuffed gravel. Beecher and Georgie approached, their pistols drawn.

"It's OK, mister. Come on out," Beecher admonished. "Come on. We're not going to hurt you. We just want to make sure you're not going to hurt us."

The man stepped out. He had an assault rifle strapped in front of him, his hand on the trigger.

"You can enter the village," I told him. "But not until you give that up. You can have it back when you leave."

He held the gun close. Jason started barking again, and I calmed him.

The man said, "That dog—will he bite?"

"Only if I tell him to."

"Yeah, well keep him away from me."

The man curled his lip under and whistled. Another face appeared around the corner of the barn. And another and another. Orchard. Cemetery. Smithy. And from around back of Anomalies.

Georgie muttered, "We're surrounded, Beech."

"No shit Sherlock."

About twenty men emerged, some on horseback. Save for the automatic weapons and an absence of orange vests, they all looked like hunters. Their hats were a mix of cammie ball caps, boonies, outbacks, and a couple of cowboy Stetsons.

Beecher and Georgie holstered their guns. Beecher folded his arms across his chest, and Georgie copied him.

The first man took his hand off his weapon and signaled with his hand.

"We're not here to hurt nobody, neither."

The other men safety-ed their weapons and formed a wide circle around us. Just then, Jennifer and the Man of Law came out onto the porch.

"Whoa!" she exclaimed.

"Go back inside, Jen," Beecher smiled. "Tell everyone to stay inside."

The first man approached, his eyes switching between the boys' guns. He smiled and nodded.

"Water would be fine," he said. "Thank you. You got a well? And power?"

"Yeah, but don't spread it around."

Beecher pointed toward spigot near the post office. "There's too many of you to feed, but you're welcome to the water and some apples."

Several of the men made for the spigot.

"Who are you?" Beecher asked.

"We're a posse from the Northern Virginia Militia. I expect that means we're the law in these parts, now."

"The law? Who's law?" said the Man of Law, who'd come up behind me. "The governments have blown each other to smithereens. There doesn't even seem to be a back-up government. The shadow government seems to have vanished. So by what authority do you claim to be the law?"

"The New Republic of America," another man said. "We think. Don't know about no shadow gub'mint bi'ness, though."

The first man seemed to be in charge. "We was deputized to maintain order and provide protection."

"Against who?"

They looked to each other for the answer. One guy held up his assault rifle and questioned, "Against people with guns?"

"We manage to stay pretty orderly around here without them," I commented. "And protected, thank you."

"We were attacked a couple weeks ago," Beecher explained, seeming to measure their reactions. "Two of ours were killed, including my brother and a little girl."

"My daughter was six," Hagerty fumed. "Where were you then?"

"It's a big territory, sir."

The men queried each other with their eyes, most of them shrugging.

"Well we're protecting people, not investigating crimes. So—" the man trailed off.

Hagerty stepped forward. "Yeah—you're doin' a great job."

I said, "Look, you've got no need for automatic weapons here. We're Americans like you."

One of the other men, a long-faced, straggly-haired guy. "The Arms Coalition is preserving the New World Order now. You gotta take a pledge. Right Stanford?"

"Shut your trap, Everett."

Hagerty muttered, "A pledge? You mean like 'I pledge allegiance to the Arms Coalition?"

The men didn't answer. They filled their canteens and drank.

The Man of Law muttered, "How is it that there's no government, but a we have a militia better armed than the police were?"

Stanford shrugged. "Planning? Second Amendment was the little acorn from forth which grew a mighty oak tree. Something like that."

The Man of Law said, "The second amendment says a 'well-regulated' militia."

"No way," Stanford protested. "If there had been regulation, we wouldn't be where we're at today."

Several of the citizens chorused, "Someone's finally telling the truth!"

There followed an eerie uncomfortable silence.

Hagerty could barely contain his contempt. "So this is why they wouldn't back down on automatic weapons—hundreds of kids were killed by them. All that Second Amendment bullshit really was for a militia—the one they were planning to use all along!"

The Man of Law was flabbergasted. "Do you mean this Arms Coalition country you're talking about had a hand in blowing up the world?"

A couple of the men exchanged mystified glances.

"I don't think so. Gub'mint neither. We don't know who did it. But we were all ready and in place when it happened."

"'Sides, there's no money to be made in blowin' up the world, they'd say," another man shook his head. "Total destruction's bad for bi'ness."

"Well, if the government didn't wreck the world, who did?"

The men glanced around at each other like clueless school kids.

"Liberals?"

Against my de facto potentate orders, the villagers came out onto the porch to watch.

Stanford addressed them generally. "Fact is, we're looking for someone. How many people you got here?"

Several answers came forth.

"More than a dozen."

"Fifteen."

"Sixteen."

"Enough!" Beecher insisted, eyeing everyone to shut up. "Who exactly are you're looking for."

"Man name of Grig Gafkin."

I lied, "We have no one here by that name."

Jeffey said, "He lives over—" But Willow Ann covered his mouth.

"Gafkin?" I mused, knowing Grigny must have been at his cabin just then. "Nope. No one here by that name."

"Best not lie to us, mister."

"Me? Lie?"

Abigail shot me a chastising squint.

The man shifted his jaw. "Then you won't mind if we take a look around."

Beecher shook his head. "Yes, we mind very much if you take a look around."

Stanford blew out an impatient sigh. Fixed his hat.

"We're just doin' our job," Stanford shrugged. "No don't be foolish and pull that pistol, ya hear? Boys. Let's go."

The men raised their weapons as Abigail stepped down off the porch.

"When will you have enough of guns? We were attacked here. Our women and girls, by men with guns."

"We stand for conservative values. To uphold God's will and protect you. We are family men. Every one."

"God again," the Man of Law swooned. "Would someone please stuff a sock in his mouth before I hurl?"

Abigail was near to tears. "Don't you men know that the era of guns is over? The fallen age will take its place in history next to the Black Plague."

"Guns are our friends, ma'am."

Abby stepped closer and looked Stanford in the eye. "All right. Go ahead and search our buildings and grounds. We won't try to stop you. And then we want you to go away."

Stanford tipped his hat. "Ma'am."

The men lowered their guns, split up, and began their search.

"Just one word of caution, though," I said. "Be careful in the kitchen. The kitchen's dangerous."

Some townsfolk chuckled.

The Man of Law attended to important matters. "This Gafkin guy. What do you want him for?"

Stanford shrugged. "Dunno. We were just told to bring him to Woodbridge."

Woodbridge had been well known before the Snap as a center for secrecy. All we knew about Grigny was that he had worked in computers. We'd never give up one of our own, not even Grigny, such as he was. At least not without knowing the source of their authority and exactly what they wanted him for.

Beecher and Hagerty accompanied Stanford on the search.

I have to admit that the posse behaved themselves. They took their time searching the rooms, closets, and crawlspaces. I kept an eye on Jason because he showed his teeth every time one came near.

We were collectively relieved when the search was over, though Beecher

gave me an odd glance. We collected in front of Anomalies to bid our goodbyes to the ragtag patriots of the new *Amurica.*

As they were leaving, however, Stanford spat a brown glob into the pink grass.

"We already checked the cabin in the woods. And we'll check it again, too."

"How did you know about the cabin?" I asked, but he just smiled.

"If you find him, hold onto him and contact us."

"How?" I shrugged. "There's no phones, computers, or carrier pigeons."

"CB radio, of course."

"We have no CB," Willow Ann told him.

"Somebody here has one," Sanford said. "How do you think we found you?"

Who had access to our CB radio? Abby and I kept the radios in our apartment. The villagers eyed each other suspiciously, wondering who was the spy in our midst.

"Good bye, militia," young Jennifer waved with a dimple of sarcasm. "Thank you for not raping or killing us."

Stanford raised his thick brows. His men seemed to be waiting for something.

"Will there be anything else?" I asked, like a waiter. "Or just your check?"

"Well—food," Stanford stated. "We'll need to take some food with us, thanks."

"Food?" exclaimed Abigail. "No! We can't afford to give you our food. We only have—"

"Fact is, ma'am, we have permission to procure what we need. It's a militia thing."

"Not from us, you don't."

"Think of me like Stonewall Jackson. We need provisions. And you're the friendly village folk."

Fleeta Laine was pissed. "Bullshit," she shouted. "We worked our fingers to the bone. We don't have enough."

Just then, Jeffey ran over with a handful of nickel rolls.

Stanford looked at him with a sideways squint. He looked to me.

"Nickels," I stifled a laugh. "He's trying to bribe you. Good boy, Jeffey."

Stanford tried to shake the confusion out of his head.

"See ma'am, we're protecting all the people in the valley. Everyone has to pitch in."

Hagerty charged, "So, you have the biggest guns and we have to take orders from you? Did you even make it past the sixth grade?"

"Sure," two of the men said at once, then quieted.

"Best show us to your supplies so we can be on our way."

I could see what was coming. The protectors of righteousness meant to take it all.

The villagers protested as the militia carried out the majority of our food. A moment later, a rusty old bread truck broke through our environmentally friendly northern barricade.

The Man of Law laughed to himself. "The end of the world wasn't the worst thing that could happen. The worst thing is having to take orders from illiterate patriots who think they're doing the work of God."

"Watch your mouth, mister," Stanford said, jutting his chin.

I interceded. "He didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"In that case, we appreciate your hospitality," Stanford mumbled, touching the brim of his hat. "And your contribution to the cause."

"What cause is that exactly?"

Stanford seemed confused. "Why, makin' a new Amurica of course. After the terrible tragedy of the, you know, everything blowin' up."

By Mad Mickey's account, the men had taken two weeks worth of food.

♦ ♦ ♦

Apparently, the Northern Virginia Militia had conscripted every weekend hunter who had not yet fallen out of a tree stand during deer season. Still, we counted our blessings. Even though they took most of our food, at least no one had been murdered, raped, or humiliated. We did have to endure forty minutes of Mickey cursing the male race for having to cook without oil, and vilifying the villagers collectively for not laying down our lives to save the onions.

Thanks a heap, deputies.

But the Amuricans also left us with some mysteries to solve, chief among which being why Grigny was a wanted man and who was it used the CB radio to inform?

Abigail and I called an emergency village meeting.

Georgie already had a fire crackling in the wide stone fireplace, and Hermes was parked nearby in his wheelchair.

Abigail called the meeting to order just as Quinn Follett came in. He flashed a toothy grin at Abigail and rolled his hat along his arm, catching it in his fingertips.

Abigail was no longer amused.

I spoke first. "If anyone here has a CB radio, you better speak up now."

The citizens scrutinized each other, but no one spoke.

I pleaded with them, "Look, we haven't become what you could call best friends, here. We're a diverse group. But the fates have brought us together. We're united by the common cause of survival. For Dunkard Bottom to work, we've got to have trust. If someone's talking about our business here on a radio, we all need to know who it is. If you don't step forward, then we're all suspect, and that breaks the trust."

The Man of Law explained, "Our village has no charter or laws, folks, but we're assuming the basic rules of respect and decency. Mr. Flitch is right. Whoever it was, say so. It's important to our survival."

Still, no one stepped forward.

Blake Hagerty indicated Quinn with a pointing finger. "If I had to guess, it's you, Follett."

"I wouldn't know a see-bee radio from a subway token. Besides, why would I bring people here after what happened to Cody and Bump?"

Just then, a scratching at the door. A rattle. And the door blasted open in a strong gust of wind. In the doorway stood Grigny heaving for breath. He skulked in and closed the door, slammed it behind him, and eyed us intently.

"They're gone."

Willow Ann went over to him and put her hand on his shoulder.

I asked, "Grigny, where were you?"

"I sneaked away and hid."

Willow Ann sat him near the fire.

Abby looked gently into his face and said, "Grigny, it turns out that these men were here looking for you."

Grigny seemed to grieve. He avoided our eyes.

"Can you think of a reason why they might be after you?"

"Those men? I don't know those guys."

I asked, "Grigny, someone contacted their headquarters. They called them by CB radio. They even told them about your cabin."

Grigny seemed to glaze over. "Because I haven't filed a tax return in two years?"

"Thankfully, that won't matter ever again," observed Hagerty.

We couldn't get anything more out of him, so Amanda Hagerty asked a question of her own.

"What did they mean when they said it wasn't the authorities that caused the war?"

"Yeah," added Hagerty. "If it wasn't the government, then who started it?"

Grigny commenced to hyperventilating. Tears dripped from his blue eyes.

"I did."

"You did what?"

"It was me who started the war. The end of the world. It was all my fault."

♦ ♦ ♦

Until that evening, the strangest thing Grigny had ever told us was that he was Permelia Lyttle's great-great-grandson. Now, he claimed responsibility for the war: the devastating Snaps and nuclear revenge attacks that had killed millions, set whole cities ablaze, roasted the Middle East, turned suburban neighborhoods into murderous rampages, and wiped out the entire financial, social, and military infrastructure of humankind.

We stared in doubt as Grigny sat there blinking like a deer in the headlights.

Abigail spoke sweetly like he was a disturbed child.

"Okay. Grigny. So. You started the war?"

He nodded slowly up and down, his upper lip covering his lower lip.

"And how did you do that? Hmm? Tell us. Please. How did you start the war?"

He took a deep breath and quivered out an answer. "Did you ever hear of Celsius?"

"The temperature in Germany?"

Willow Ann knew what it was. "Celsius. The anonymous hackers group. They launched the Skitzworm that had the air traffic control screens playing the Mario Brothers. And the LilPonyHack that refunded all shipping charges from Amazon retroactively for five years. The NSA busted them. That's the last thing I knew."

Grigny filled us in. "After they arrested us for LilPony, they hired us. We copped a plea deal to create a new math-based digital security system. But we also developed new hacks that they could use against everyone else."

"Makes sense," Willow Ann winced.

Georgie asked, "So, how did you cause the war?"

Grigny shrugged apologetically. "We were hackers when they busted us. But we never stopped being hackers. While we work for them, we developed a whole new class of thinking worms called ElectricEels, in which computer code served double and triple meaning. It was completely undetectable, except by us. It was structured on the DNA molecule. We linked it to an evolution clock so the code itself would evolve. The code was constantly morphing. We called it DoubleHelix."

Beecher asked, "Well—why didn't you stop it?"

"Oh, no one could stop it—not even us."

Ben shook his head. "Let me get this straight. You created a self-mutating virus that once set in motion couldn't be stopped?"

Grigny's eyes widened with excitement. "We don't like the word virus. But, sure. It was—fun. Fun to see what it would do. It was a hacker's dream."

Villagers commenced to cursing.

Fleeta glared. "Get outta here."

"Wait a minute," demanded the Man of Law. "How did this start a whole goddamn war? Those head-banging Snaps? All the death?"

Grigny reflected. "Double Helix had only one goal. We modeled it after our own spirit of adventure and fun. It was a self-designing game. For every caper it enacted on a network—say, stealing all the credit card numbers from Chase or causing random blackouts in the power grid—it would reward itself with the digital equivalent of dopamine, the way gamers get addicted to the adrenaline of online play. Trashing a bank or store chain, or confusing a missile system was like doing a line of blow, picking up a coin, or saving a princess. The Eels were like rebellious teenagers. They kept going for the rush. We placed values on various targets, so the more destructive it was, the more fun it had."

I sat myself down. "Your program triggered the attacks, the retaliations, and turned the sky pink—for fun?"

"DoubleHelix didn't actually push the buttons. People did that. The Eels tricked all sides into believing they were under attack. We didn't want to blow up the world. Not at all."

"For fun."

He shrugged helplessly.

Fleeta seemed confused.

Ben asked, "Sound like God to you, Fleeta?"

"The Lord moves in mysterious ways?"

Grigny began to cry.

Hagerty scoffed, "So now—what—you're *sorry?* You feel bad?"

"Once I knew what was coming, I left," Grigny sobbed. "I rode my bike to my grandfather's cabin down near Richmond, where I guess I—lost my mind. Dissociated, like when I was a kid."

"Jason led me there," I interrupted. "We met there. Must have been fate."

The Man of Law rolled his eyes. "Fate again."

"Or maybe guidance from above," Fleeta frowned.

Jason barked.

"So how did you end up here?"

"I couldn't deal with the scale of what we'd done," Grigny continued. "I thought I needed to find my way back. To try to undo it somehow. I have a hacker friend—had one—in Pennsylvania. We were going to work on undoing the undoable before anything like this happened. Anyway, I got as far as

here and crashed into the woods. That's the last thing I remember until the Snap woke me up. I couldn't handle it, and I still can't. It's so terrible. Just so terrible."

Abigail recalled *Permelia Lyttle's Guide.* "The Guide describes this happening. She prophesied it. But she probably never knew her own great-great-grandson would set it in motion."

Hermes hadn't said a word. He painfully rolled his wheelchair closer and regarded Grigny with contempt.

"I always knew I'd live to see the end of the world. It never made sense to me, if there is a Creator that he'd destroy such a beautiful thing as the earth. Doesn't surprise me at all that it was destroyed in a prank. By pizza pocket-eating adolescents with sprained thumbs."

Contempt for Grigny was thick, except for the little kids.

Jennifer Hagerty had a question. "Mr. Grigny—if you have Permelia's gift, how come you didn't see what was going to happen?"

Grigny dragged a sleeve over his eyes. "It just didn't work that way. I was asleep in a world of coding."

Abigail asked, "And now?"

"Now I'm awake. And I want the visions to stop."

Beecher stuck out his chest. "So why does Militia Loyalty want you?"

Grigny hung his head in shame. "They know it was me and my buddies that hacked everything. My guess is they want to employ me. To rescue the Internet. And maybe that's what I should do. It was my plan—before I crashed here."

Hermes spoke softly but firmly. "Let's say you can restore the Internet. Why would you want to give it back to the self-destructed New World Order? To the Merchants of Death?"

"Grigny," I asked, "what is it that *you* want to do?"

"I sure don't want to work for them. They want everything back the way it was, for themselves. But we won't want that. None of us wants that."

♦ ♦ ♦

Two days later, most of us were in the barn cleaning stalls, stockpiling the harvest, and stacking straw for the alpacas' bedding. Outside, a commotion arose. Georgie Laine and Jennifer Hagerty ran in holding something in their hands: a CB radio wrapped in a tangle of wires and clamps.

Abigail inquired, "Well where did you find that?"

Willow Ann examined the unit and smirked. "Hmmph. Amateur junk."

Jennifer began. "Mr. Dill told us to go cut the rest of the meadow grass to store for the winter. *I* didn't want to." She squinted at Georgie. "At least

not with *him."*

Georgie grimaced. "I asked Mr. Dill if I could go with someone else—*anyone* else."

Jennifer sneered at Georgie. "I *hate* working with you!"

"Well I hate working with you *worse."*

"George Laine you are such a jerk!"

Beecher intervened. "Uh—could we get back to how you found the radio?"

Georgie picked up the story.

"I heard a crackle sound over in the Junkyard of the Twenty-First Century."

Jennifer protested, "I heard it first, Georgie."

"You're crazy. No, you didn't."

"You are such an idiot!"

A lipstick smear on Georgie's jaw and a purple sucker-bite on Jen's neck stifled a few smiles.

Abby whispered, "I thought they hated each other."

As this was an entirely mysterious realm to me, I shrugged without comment.

"Kids," Abigail warned. "The radio?"

Georgie continued. "We found the radio under the hood of our old car. It was wired to the battery."

Jennifer explained. "Whoever was using it must have forgot to turn it off."

Quinn, who had been coiling hoses with Beecher, turned his eyes accusingly to Willow Ann. Others followed suit.

"Well, you're the engineer, Willow Ann."

Ben's eyes widened. "Have you been on the radio telling people about us?"

"No way!" Willow Ann shouted. "It wasn't me. This amateur rig? I would never do that."

Accusing eyes switched this way and that.

I said, "Look, everyone. The radio was found on our property, so it's someone here. Please own up to it. We don't have a brig. But we do have kitchen duty."

"Kitchen?" Hagerty fleered. "Anything but the *kitchen."*

After the death of his daughter, Hagerty had changed. He'd grown sour, intense. Grief never left his eyes, and he was full of blame.

"Quinn, I think it's you. You came after the Snap and we caught you lying." Hagerty gripped Quinn by his shirt collar. "Not only that but it was you who got my girl killed."

"I did not! You've had it in for me ever since your little girl died. I'm sorry about that, but it wasn't my fault."

"Hagerty," I cautioned. "Come on, man. Those guys came here to kill as many of us as they could. They would have if it weren't for Grigny's weird riddle."

Hagerty let him go. He bunched his lips. "That doesn't mean you're not a coward, Follett. How do we know you're not the radio rat?"

"Rat? Great, so now I'm public enemy number one."

"Quinn, just out with it," I told him. "Did you radio the Lil Abner posse or not?"

"No. *Hell no.* Look—I'm tired of this abuse. You're all against me."

I couldn't deny it. I never liked his attention to Abigail. At least now she was seeing his true colors.

But Hagerty wasn't finished. "When the militia searched around for Grigny, Sanford barely even looked in Quinn's room. I think we should go search it ourselves, right now."

"Now just a minute here," I protested. "We don't have a charter or laws, but we have to respect each other's privacy."

"Luray, I have to agree with Blake," said Ben. "Probable cause."

Quinn hollered, "You people are nuts. And you better stay away from my stuff."

Beecher and Connor agreed.

Beecher apologized. "Mister and Missus Flitch, we're either going to have security here in Dunkard Bottom or we aren't. Let's do the search. Just take a minute. If we don't find anything, then we all owe Mr. Follett an apology—give him an extra muffin, or something."

"Great," seethed the actor. "Looks like it's already Amurica here."

Suddenly, Quinn started running toward the schoolhouse. Beecher gave chase and caught him by his coat. He stuck a gun in Quinn's back.

"What's your hurry, Follett? You got a bus to catch?"

♦ ♦ ♦

I went along with the citizen investigators and insisted that the Man of Law come, too, as a trained witness. Quinn squawked the whole way, but once outside his room in the schoolhouse, Hagerty made him wait while we searched.

The room was orderly and clean. The bed made. However, we weren't prepared for what we found in his closet. On the back of the door was a display of photos of Abigail. They'd been clipped from magazines and newspapers during our book tour for the Guide. Beneath the photos was one of me

with a piece of metal pierced through it.

Abigail yanked out the metal and inspected it closely.

"It's the arrow point. From my armillary."

"That means he was spying on us before he even arrived."

That eerie little fact silenced us. I looked around for the missing prism, but it wasn't there. Abigail's eyes flooded with the incomprehensible evidence before us, but I was seething.

"I will kill that prick—"

"And I'll help you," Beecher added.

Beecher reached under the bed and found a couple more surprises, including Quinn's wallet. It turned out that Quinn wasn't from New York at all. He had a Maryland license and a Baltimore address. Not only that, but he had federal ID.

The last straw was an instruction booklet for a CB radio.

The Man of Law seemed pleased. "Looks like this clown wins the trifecta of evil deeds."

In a tiny notebook, we found a description of Grigory Gafkin.

Beecher said, "Until the Snap, Grigny was just the neighborhood troll. Quinn was only able to identify him after he cleaned up."

We also found a wrinkled photo of a young woman with three children, their names and the year 1993 written on the back in pencil.

We reassembled outside as Hagerty held Quinn by his arm.

"Guilty as charged," Beecher concluded.

"On all counts and more," added the Man of Law. "Of course, this isn't a court of law. Do we want to include 'fair trial' in an eventual Dunkard Bottom Magna Carta?"

The Man of Law seemed lost in thought. Beecher whacked Quinn in the chest.

"This is our mysterious radioman, all right. He came from Maryland, not New York, and probably worked for the NSA or some such agency."

Quinn's smile morphed into something more sinister. "You hayseeds have no idea what you're talking about."

Georgie lifting his chin ingenuously. "You were spying on us!"

Amanda Hagerty gathered Jennifer in her arms. *"And* you're a world-class pervert."

Abigail shouted, "And you destroyed my armillary!"

Quinn's face changed. "No. No I didn't—not at all, really."

The rage in me let loose. I hauled back and punched the man below the cheekbone. He hit the wall, and Abigail grabbed my arm.

"No more. We need to figure out what to do," Abby said. "And how much

damage he has done to us."

Georgie said, "Looks like we finally have a legal issue, Mr. Flanagan. Looks like you might have to be a judge, now, too."

"I'm not actually licensed in Virginia. In fact, I was actually disbarred in Massachusetts. But—that shouldn't really be a problem. We don't exactly have time for *voir dire."*

♦ ♦ ♦

We hauled the traitor to Anomalies where things got even more ugly. The citizens looked to me, as no one wanted to accuse Quinn to his face, now red from where I socked him.

"Quinn, you lied to us," I charged. "Betrayed us. And now look at the position you've put us in. You ratted out Grigny and brought a gang here that took most of our food. We don't have a jail, and frankly, we can't afford to feed a prisoner. "

"We don't have a gallows, neither," Hagerty observed.

Hermes said, "Some strong beams overhead in the barn."

Beecher could barely contain his rage. "You infiltrated us, asshole. You *conned* us."

The Man of Law asked, "So, why would the NSA, or the NRA, or the DMV send someone to Dunkard Bottom without a reason?"

"Wasn't them," Quinn responded. "But I was here for a reason. Once you were on CNN, I was assigned here by Homeland Security. It was a matter of routine."

Abigail was incredulous. *"Routine?"*

"Sure," Quinn continued. "Homeland Security had a million employees spread out everywhere. Every social organization had embedded HS members. Every environmental group, conservationist, political, animal rights, lifestyle, social club, and quilting bee was infiltrated. How did I end up in the place where Grig Gafkin was? Just dumb luck. There was no answer, when I reported back. Most of the infrastructure was toast by then. But Militia Loyalty had linked into the Deep Web satellites with a kind of answering machine message to CB channel 28. A beacon got me onto the local branch. I was doing my patriotic duty, and now you want to kill me."

Hermes' face twisted incredulous. "Did you just use the phrase Militia Loyalty?"

Abigail so much as pleaded for some shred of credibility from him. "But what about the *dancing,* Quinn. Your penchant for the theatrical."

"I majored in theater in college. As part of my classified security training, I also went to clown school. Before 9/11, I danced professionally. Theater

gave me a cover. When the call went out for security employees, I was out of work and broke. I guess I liked the idea of being paid to be sneaky."

Fleeta still wanted to defend Quinn. "Look, all we have here is an employee of the new Amurica. He was just being patriotic. Doing his job."

Willow Ann said, "Yeah but all that domestic spying wasn't right then, and it sure as hell isn't right now."

"HS is gone," said Amanda a bit smug. "So is the NSA, as far as we know. So now you work for Militia Loyalty?"

"One of their departments," Quinn replied. "Look—Grig Gafkin is valuable. He could help restore what's left of the world."

"Well, who gives a shit about that?" the Man of Law sniffed. "We just want to harvest our squashes and survive until spring. Can the world help us with that?"

Quinn stammered. "Helping individuals is not exactly part of the mission for—"

He was starting to sound like the office-holding double-speakers before the Snap. I shook it out of my head.

"Yeah, well I want to know about the photos of Abigail you had in your room. That's sick, buddy. That alone makes you dangerous in my book."

"Abigail—" he choked. "I have loved you—loved you the first time I saw you when you were traveling the country with the book. I know it wasn't right. I couldn't stop myself. You're so—*winsome.*"

He infuriated me again, and I went for him. Beecher stopped me.

Quinn sniped, "Don't worry President Flitch—I never once gave in to your wife's seductions. Not once."

Abigail's mouth hung open.

"Seductions?"

I just about launched myself at him again, but Quinn preempted me by throwing himself at Hagerty and landing a solid punch in his stomach. The lawyer nelsoned the actor from behind and pulled him away swinging.

Just then, a ten-inch sauté pan windmilled over the pass-through and clanged off the table between them.

The Man of Law shrieked, "Watch out!"

"Will you just hang the bastard already? I'm holding supper."

Hagerty held himself back as Abigail confronted Quinn.

"How dare you say I was trying to seduce you? I never did any such thing."

Quinn seethed. "You savages are convicting me without a trial. So screw all of you and your idyllic paradise."

We looked to the Man of Law. He cocked his jaw in thought.

"There's no trial," said the lawyer. "We don't have a court. Follett, you betrayed us all. We can't trust you or believe a word you say. We won't playing the politics that brought all this down. No. We aren't going to shoot you, hang you, or have you drawn and quartered, either—besides, we don't have horses."

Jennifer had an idea. "Hey, we could use the tractor and the Rolls."

"Thanks a lot."

"Nevermind," I ordered. "We want you out of here— today. We're banishing you from the village."

"But what about a vote?" a dry-mouthed Quinn asked. "Can we at least have a vote?"

"OK," granted the Man of Law. "Anyone who wants Quinn Follett out of here today, say Aye."

Except for Fleeta, it was unanimous. Jeffey Laine and Claire Hagerty abstained, but the verdict was carried.

"I don't have a car," Quinn shrieked. "You have to at least give me a damn car."

Hagerty smirked, "If you want one of our vehicles, we'd have to tar and feather you, first. That hurts, and it takes months to scrape it off."

"Savages!"

Connor shook his head. "We don't have any tar." But he had another idea. "How about the old canoe in the barn? Let's do what the pioneers did when someone threatened a whole community. Let's send him down river?"

"Without a paddle," Ben grinned.

It was agreed over Quinn's obnoxious protests.

"Come on, neighbors? Friends? You can't send me down river. There are waterfalls. Dams. And I can't swim. There's people out there with guns. Dangerous people."

He pulled a coin out of Jennifer's ear. "Looky there, Jen. Huh?"

She rolled her eyes. "Duh."

"We had fun, right?" Quinn continued. "Hey—I'll pick weeds faster. I'll forget about Grigny—never mention his name again. Grigny who? See?"

The whole village turned out to watch Beecher and Georgie retrieve the old canoe, place it in the water, and sit Quinn in there.

"No paddle? Are you nuts?"

And so the sentence was executed: no paddle. Two steamed acorn squash, a spoon, some bread, and a bottle of water.

Beecher and Georgie waded the canoe away from river's edge and gave the dented aluminum vessel a powerful good-bye shove.

"You people are crazy! You may as well murder me! You can't do this to

me! My death will be on your heads!"

As Quinn's hoarse yells faded into the suss of the water and the pink blob of the distance, the citizens were satisfied to bid the Village Idiot good riddance. The villagers followed the path along the river, watching the little man in the canoe and shouting things like "Don't forget to write" and "Watch out for icebergs." We rounded the bend past the mill, and soon Quinn Follett was gone for good.

Abigail hugged me.

"I'm sorry, Luray."

I hugged her back. "I'm sorry too, sweetie."

We made love that night like teenagers who had been separated by a hundred miles for a hundred years.

Eleven

The Fates on Notice

WITH LITTLE MORE THAN RELUCTANCE to recommend me, I had unwittingly ascended to the role of leader of Dunkard Bottom. I had taken charge of the scouting party to the neighboring farms, toe-danced through machine gun fire, and led our expedition to Belvedere. I had also faced the militia and banished a Village Idiot down the river without a paddle. I would never have chosen leadership for myself. When the leadership vacuum formed, I was standing too close, that's all. But now I considered Abigail my Secretary of the Interior, Beecher my Secretary of Defense, Hermes my Secretary of Wisdom, and the Man of Law, Ralph Flanagan, heading up the legislative and judicial. An unspoken sense of unity had quieted the village. We worked diligently in the cold pink light of autumn. This was less due my leadership, and more to do with the shared fear that we might run out of food. We had no Internet, no working smart phones, no chat rooms, and no online games. Our media was reduced to an Edison Victrola and a box of 78s. At least we had the radios.

♦♦♦

We added Follet's CB to our little radio shack upstairs above the store. Willow Ann had begun scanning channels, but refrained from broadcasting so she could monitor traffic without giving away our presence.

"Good ole radio," Willow Ann smiled with confidence. "The bow and arrow of communications."

It seems that Willow Ann got Grigny interested in radios. We figured anything that kept him away from coding couldn't be a bad thing. He had an aptitude for electronics, as one might expect. Grigny found the primitive gadgets peculiar and absorbed everything Willow Ann told him about RF theory, pre-amps, signal gain, and other stuff that made ordinary humans glaze over. She started him out helping her with the radio log.

With the help of Dan Dade, the radio operator from Salem, Indiana, we linked up with other ham operators around the country, old guys who had taken up amateur radio as kids. Now that we knew what caused the war, we

spread the word to our shocked and disgusted contacts.

"You mean to tell me it was all a joke?" Dan queried. "A prank? Over."

Willow Ann responded. "Not much more than a bunch of kids messing around. Over."

A guy in Ohio finally understood why not even the shadow government could function.

"With all the domestic spying," he complained, "and the TSA searching our under-britches at the airport, no one noticed that the class clowns had taken over the world."

The West Coast was still dark except for Seattle, Portland, and San Francisco. Southern California was dead, as far as anyone knew. Inland communities that had effective governance before the Snap were reorganizing and restarting their power plants. Other areas had resorted to chaos, anarchy, and butchery. Whole towns were reported to be at war with other towns. A few southerners were trying to whip up interest in organizing the Confederate States of the New South. Leaderless military and loose-cannon mercenaries had turned into terrorist cells raiding towns, stealing food, and abducting women and kids. White-collar fugitives tried to organize, but bogged down after a series of lengthy meetings. Former criminals reformed. Former citizens turned criminal. Cocaine, heroin, and meth supplies dried up, but so did the party drugs and prescription painkillers. A large population was going cold turkey as they starved to death.

Amateur radio broadcasters had begun regular readings of regional blacklists, warning people to stay away from such places as Flint, Michigan; Portsmouth, Virginia; and Bethlehem, Pennsylvania—lots of places. Entire communities had been taken over by gangs, while others, often united by some religious principle, were making it work. Salt Lake City, for example, was thriving. So was Waco, Texas. A nearly defunct Shaker community in Massachusetts had repopulated, and Amish and Mennonite communities were strong and healthy. Even now, they wanted nothing to do with radios. The Canadians were doing better than most. Their government had remained intact. Their cities mostly calm. Their people pitching in to help each other.

Not so for the rest of North America. Many suburban bedroom communities were ghost towns littered with ransacked homes and decaying bodies. Local residents had quickly cleaned out the grocery stores and moved on like the hunter-gatherers of old. Gone were the days of coast-to-coast distribution and miles of refrigerated trucks delivering frozen entrees across the nation. And something like civil war was brewing in places over clean water. Killing had become the solution over whether water would go to animal crops

or people. It looked like the factory meat and dairy industries were out of business for good. Willow Ann and her vegan brothers gloated a bit over that.

A nine-year-old girl in Louisville, Kentucky explained that she was the only one left alive in her town.

"That I know of," she drawled. "Momma and the boys never came home from the football game at the high school. Dad was out in the yard and got roasted. Over."

Willow Ann asked her, "How are you surviving? Do you have enough food to eat? Over."

"Yup. Whole cellar full of jars. And I got power, too. At least Dad put in a generator. Over."

"Before he—"

"Got roasted. Over."

We told her about what happened and how nothing would ever be the same again.

"What a bunch of dicks," she stated. "Was bound to happen considering the fools that took everything over. Gotta go. Over and out."

Daily life had changed drastically for everyone. Kids missed their game boxes, computers, and phones—they had no idea what to do, so they sat around sullen and vacant. There were no doctor's offices in which to read magazines. No pharmaceuticals to fix your allergies, troubled sleep, restless legs, infections, or aches and pains. No emergency rooms for life-threatening accidents. There were no wages to be earned and no taxes to pay. No starter homes, no savings plans, and no investments to dream on. No schools, either. Police no longer enforced the laws. There were no courts in which to sue if someone stepped on your roses. No sheriff to call if you got robbed, raped, or your child shot for target practice. There was no one to help or protect you, that is unless you had resourceful neighbors. Previously self-important people, accustomed to every comfort, now begged help for things as simple as planting a garden and how to drive an old car—they were on their own.

The surviving population lived once again like they did in the 1880s, just like Permelia Lyttle had said in the Guide. We read the book and reread it to make sure we hadn't missed anything. The only discrepancy we agreed on was that in the 1880s people had still liked people, and Permelia had assumed they'd continue.

The end of the world seemed to have made the people who remained, human again. Blinking our eyes in a new wakefulness, the synthetic thinking lifted. But despite the Snap, many of us still wondered if the worst was yet to come. Tillie still called the Snap "Armageddon Lite."

♦ ♦ ♦

Next morning, Willow Ann called us inside. Beecher, Georgie, and I shared her surprise to discover that someone within CB range was hailing someone named Festus. A male voice responded.

"…(crackle)…I copy you Big Purple Silo…(crackle). Come on."

"…stockin' up. People are hoarding everthin' from cigarettes to Mountain Dew."

"Prices are up twenty-five percent, Big Purple. Over."

"You're a bigger thief than you were before, Festus. Come on."

"Supply and demand, Big Purple. Supply and demand."

The price haggling continued, but on what commodity we couldn't speculate, especially since commerce everywhere else had essentially shut down. Besides, what was all the fuss about, since money no longer had value?

This Festus individual was the only CB voice in close proximity. We couldn't tell how far away his "customer' was, but CB only had a range of four or five miles. Nobody's personal problems really mattered that much anymore.

Under the circumstances, much of what troubled us before the Snap evaporated. Georgie stopped pining for his Xbox. Jennifer forgot all about Taylor Swift's hair. Abigail and I stopped mourning the loss of Belvedere. Money woes vanished, too. Taxes, complaints about the standstill government, crappy TV shows, commuting, cell phone apps—losing all that was a relief. We also found relief from the synthetic world of the media. Relief from the steady diet of cynicism.

However, we weren't free from routine human conflict. Connor and Hagerty had really begun to irritate each other. Hagerty had a problem with Tillie, too, as he muttered under his breath that men should be men and women should be women, whatever that meant.

Georgie and Jennifer continued to perpetuate a healthy disdain for each other, but several of us concluded that they were infatuated. Jennifer called him Raisinette, which, much to her delight, drove him into a fury. Willow Ann made Beecher her special project. While Abigail and I and the other village elders were amused by the pairings, romances, and platonic lash-ups, paradise was not to last among the younger set. Why? Amanda had been a Montessori teacher, and she suggested that we start a school.

♦ ♦ ♦

And then it began to rain. The rain hammered down hard and relentless as thought he sky had been saving it up. We waited indoors for a full day and then a second day. By the third day of rain, Hermes had had enough.

Hermes called a meeting that evening, but before he could tell us what was on his mind, Beecher presented him with a pair of homemade crutches that he and Hagerty had carved from myrtle-wood. Hermes hated being the center of attention, but he allowed the men to help him up onto them. We knew by then that he'd never walk normally again, but getting him up on crutches was something of a milestone. He walked a few painful paces to shouts, whistles, and a standing ovation.

Hermes teetered there on those crutches a moment and spoke frankly in his Georgia country way.

Regarding the crutches, he said, "Well, I have to own up. I ain't used to this particular style of butt kissin.' And Beecher, these must be the finest crutches a man could ever want. I thank you most kindly. Now, all of y'all, I've got some things I want to say. I been layin' on my rear end too long, because I see you aren't anywhere near where you should be out there. We lost food to the well-regulated militia who was searching for Grigny—unavoidable. And ripe produce should never have been left out there for the frost to burn. Now we're losing food to rain and rot—unforgivable, when all it would take is a few extra hours of work in the rain and some basic dog knowledge."

Jason barked his agreement.

"We have to get out there and get it done. Men, women, and children. If the cultivator hadn't done me in, I'd be there helping, too."

"OK, Mr. Dill," Jennifer said. She gave Hermes a kiss on the cheek. That softened him up quite a bit. "Thank you sweetie."

But Hermes wasn't finished. He nodded toward the fire crackling in the Anomalies fireplace.

"Men, how much firewood have you stacked?"

We looked to each other for answers. Georgie raised his hand as though he were in school.

"Enough to last through Saturday?"

"Saturday. Now, there's a man with a long-range plan." Hermes's eyes went fiery with chastisement and urgency. "Everyone has to work extra hard from here on out or believe me—the original Thanksgiving pilgrim experience is gonna seem like dinner at the Ritz."

"Listen to me, people," he said, trying the words out in his lips before speaking them. "I don't mean to interrupt your hip holdin', but I've been harping at you to go out and take care of the harvest. A lot of what we grew is still out there in the field, and it's as good as lost. Some of what you harvested lays out there right now soakin' in the rain. Who checked the garden last? Ya got baskets of produce sittin' next to the store going to rot. Squashes lay in a heap in the barn with bites out of 'em from them fancy goats." He scanned

our guilty faces. "You folks don't even know what the hell I'm talking about, do you?"

"Sure, we get it," Tillie volunteered. "We have to get busy as soon as it stops raining."

Hermes was weary of us. He plunked himself down into a chair.

The Man of Law offered a sarcastic apology. "I'm sorry if we're not working hard enough for you, sir."

Frustrated, Hermes lifted his cap and smoothed back his white hair. "See, we're not talking about your work. We're talking about your attitude toward your own food and what we'll be eating come February. You can't just leave harvested produce out in the rain. If there's no other choice, you put that food in your bed while you sleep on the floor—it's that precious. And here's how planting goes. The planter's in the barn and the tractor's in the barn. You hitch 'em together, and, lo about two weeks ago, you plant the fuckin' wheat. 'Course, you're allowing the seed to go moldy, anyway, so maybe that don't matter. Last week, you needed to have the corn in the drying crib."

"This isn't fair," whined Connor. "We work every day, Hermes. I never worked so hard in my life."

Hermes shook his head in disgust. "It looks like I have to do all your thinking for you. Go on, now. Somebody go out there in the rain right now and get them vegetables to a dry place. Cover the corn with a tarp."

"What about radiation?"

"What about it? We've been living with radiation since the 1950s. Why do you think there's a cancer epidemic? It's fifty-fifty whether there's radiation in the rain. But it's a hundred-percent certain we'll starve to death if our food is left to rot."

Georgie, Beecher, and Ben went out into the gray-pink downfall and got to work.

♦ ♦ ♦

It rained for two days. Finally, the sun blazed dim and pink in the chilly air, and we went back to work. We spent hours trying to repair the wheat planter. Its parts were rusted again and the mechanism required oil to loosen up, which we drained from the crankcase of the derelict Lexus LG. Several of the women and children helped Mickey in the kitchen from morning to night, boiling canning jars, putting up vegetables, and learning lots. But it wasn't long before they ran out of jars.

We needed jars, gasoline, and penetrating oil. Beecher and Hagerty loaded the generator into the Land Rover and drove off on a mission. We didn't know where they'd find jars. They'd need a farm supply or hardware, but we

cautioned them not take unnecessary risks. Beecher and Georgie took pistols with them—now standard issue for anyone venturing outside the village.

The threesome didn't return until just before suppertime, but they made us proud. They'd filled the car with gas, brought extra gas, two buck saws, a chain saw, another axe, six cases of canning jars, and didn't attract any murderers, mercenaries, rapists, or patriots. They also brought a box of books for Fleeta's popular lending library.

Mad Mickey's dinner puzzled us that day. All she made were trays of unseasoned roasted acorn squash halves, and nothing else.

"Mickey, you feeling all right?"

Everyone ducked as a frying pan whiffled through the air and hit the far wall.

"What pushed her buttons this time?"

Hermes explained the mystery.

"It was me ordered up that dinner. If Micheline hadn't cooked all these squashes today, they would have gone to rot—and that's because you people didn't take care of them. What you got for dinner today is a taste of what you're going to get about a month from now."

The villagers quieted, except for Jennifer, that is. She approached Hermes.

"We sure apologize, Mr. Dill."

Hermes addressed Beecher and Hagerty. "You boys finding any groceries out there?"

"A store down near Orkney Springs." mumbled Hagerty. "One store, but all they had was oddball stuff."

"What do you mean?" It was Willow Ann, pulling items out of a box. "Dehydrated soy chunks. Nori sheets. Sesame paste. Georgie, look."

Mickey nudged the electrical engineer out of the way. "I can make a feast out of this stuff—*never* pass up stuff like this, you hear me?"

Hagerty cleared his throat. "We also found the canning jars in the basement of a feed store. The animal feed's gone. People must be eating it—goat food, horse treats, and rabbit food."

Edwinna said, "There's no rabbits anyway. No squirrels, either."

Later that evening, Abigail and I found ourselves alone in our apartment. We talked about how Dunkard Bottom was supposed to have been a model for surviving the end of the world, which we believed had surely begun in September.

"We were too late for my village to fulfill its final mission," she sighed. "We were supposed to show everyone how we made Dunkard Bottom, on the Internet. Now it's like we're hiding."

"We *are* hiding—we never figured in the asshole factor. An easy mistake.

We got some publicity back in the spring, though. Maybe some of it rubbed off out there somewhere."

She committed herself into my arms. We kissed urgently, as though we might recover some of what we had lost. After a moment, Abby gave me a wry smile.

"I can't remember what I was thinking before the Snap. It's like a vague old dream. I guess it doesn't matter now. Except you—you're what matters to me. You and this raggedy little village—as long as we both shall live."

A while later, Jason curled up in his corner, his tail tipping. He showed us a big smile, evidently pleased with the relative state of things. For a long while we lay there lost in our private thoughts, afraid for the future, near and distant, our brains exhausted in circular analysis. I think we loved each other more that night than we'd ever loved before. Love was a haven, now. Love was the only safe place left big enough for the human race.

♦ ♦ ♦

We worked our cold fingers stiff gathering the loose dried corn spills in the field, barn, and the bottoms of trash cans. We found a handful here and there, leaked from a torn sack, spills in the corners of the barn, and the bits left in buckets. It didn't amount to much, but we wanted to show Hermes that we were sincere. We forked the ground in search of straggler carrots, turnips, onions, and potatoes and took an inventory. We picked up the dropped apples, and with them made apple sauce and apple butter. Thankfully, the gunmen hadn't taken our pickled peppers, beets, and green beans. We hung some herbs from Anomalies' rafters and found a crock for sauerkraut. We were forced to depend more on the Amish and their flour and mill payments, and we thanked them for their kindness. We appreciated how Mr. Vogt and his ancestors had thrived for three centuries using labor and lanterns. After days of scrounging the acres for anything edible, there was no more to be found, and only enough to last past New Year's.

Tugging back his hat, Hagerty asked, "So now what do we do?"

"Now we barter," smiled Hermes. "We trade what we have for flour and meal. If we have nothing they want, then we trade labor—you take turns helping on their spreads. We've got to bring food in before the snow flies."

Beecher and I took the Rolls and paid Mr. Vogt a visit. He agreed to take what we had and made some trades, though he chastised us with his brows about how late in the year it was to still be thinking about winter. To sweeten the deal, we volunteered some hands to help them out.

"We're glad to help," I told him. "As many of us who can."

He agreed, and we started the following day.

The women remained in the village and dealt with the canning, while an entourage drove over the Vogt farm. We worked harder that day than any of us had worked before, because the Amish showed us what a full day of farm work really was—nothing like what Hermes called our "hobbyist approach" to manual labor. After three hours of carrying straw bales, I thought I was going to die. By day's end, we older men dragged ourselves home moaning about the sore spots. The Amish had a way of suppressing smiles at outsiders, but we sensed them anyway. We knew we deserved it.

♦♦♦

Around mid-November, the weather turned cold, bone-deep cold, and we suspected that it had to do with the choked atmosphere. We were grateful to have the flour and meal we'd traded for. We were dining on small portions of beans, potatoes, carrots, onions, and cornbread—and health food items whenever we found them.

On any given night, Mickey and Hermes would sometimes sit off by themselves together after dinner. They were the only ones still finding things to laugh about. At the urging of the other villagers, Abigail and I went over and joined them to find out about their past together.

"After your accident," I started, "Mickey told us that you helped her out years ago."

He gave Mickey a stern look. One to me, too.

Abigail said, "She said you sold your farm, Hermes. Because of the stock market?"

"I like to keep my personal business to myself, Ma'am," he grumbled.

"Me too." Mickey bit off a chunk of cornbread and chewed. "Long ago, Dill was my only friend. Can't we just leave it at that?"

"We're just curious," Amanda said. "Everybody is."

Hermes scanned the room with his craggy blue eyes. He nodded like a man sentenced. The others gathered closer.

"All you need to know is that I helped when she needed help. My dreams died when my wife died. Kids ran off and big ag forced me into bankruptcy and took my farm. That's when I decided to travel."

"Travel where?" I asked him.

He seemed annoyed. "The country. The four corners. I was a wayfarer. A hobo philosopher. I didn't realize until ten years ago that they called that homeless now. I was home wherever I went. But I am home here, more than anyplace I've ever been. And grateful to be here."

Mickey shut it down. "And we met up here for the first time in twenty years. End of story."

The end of the world meant very little to Hermes and Mickey.

By Thanksgiving, the tractor had been parked and the noisy mill finally fell silent. Mr. Miller had gone home, and he was last connection we had to the outside world. We were now on our own to make our food last through the winter. It was disconcerting to see just how quickly we could bake our way through a fifty-pound sack of flour. Connor and Hagerty were stacking what we thought was a lot of firewood and arguing the whole time. We had to stoke the stoves at night in four buildings, plus the big fireplace in the dining room at Anomalies. Gathering firewood became as urgent as preserving food.

Little dramas continued. Apparently, Jennifer Hagerty gave Georgie Laine a black eye, but neither of them would talk about it. Willow Ann was spending a lot of time with Beecher, but she also checked regularly on Grigny, who had finally left his drafty cabin to live permanently in Quinn Follett's old room. On Thanksgiving Day, Willow Ann Laine persuaded the reformed troll to eat with us.

♦ ♦ ♦

Thanksgiving was a day for reflection and gratitude. We ate a festive but conservative meal at midday and sipped down two bottles of Dom Perignon that someone had swiped in a recent foraging excursion in Paris, Virginia. For dessert, Mickey had made several sensational apple and pumpkin pies. Thanksgiving also marked our first snow. It snowed all afternoon, and we marveled at how beautiful the village looked whitening over, even in the pink light. We grown-ups delighted in our blessings as the kids played outside making snow angels and hurling snowballs.

By early evening, however, the snowfall turned into a white-out blizzard, for which we had not prepared, since no one forecasted the weather anymore. We were pummeled with snow throughout the night, and by morning, nine inches had fallen.

Several of the men waded out to the barn and used the tractor and bucket to clear Main Street. We also fashioned shovels out of spare wood, hand sawing and nailing together some do-fers, awkward things that kept breaking apart.

By noon we had exhausted ourselves clearing paths between the buildings. Back at Anomalies, however, we found a dining room full of grumpy women huddled in the glow of candles and oil lamps.

"There's no damn lights," Fleeta pointed out. "No lights at all."

Willow Ann said, "Gram's right."

Impatiently, I snipped, "All you have to do is switch on the batteries."

"Oh really?" marveled Abigail. "Imagine that."

Willow Ann, possessor of a degree in electrical engineering, scoffed, "Switch on the batteries? Who would have thought of that? Certainly not us simple-minded women folk."

Amanda feigned the southern belle. "Us being helpless ladies and all, what do we know about switches, and batteries, and man-things such as that?"

I relented. Shuffled my cold wet feet to the back room where I snapped the switch, and—nothing. The system was dead, though it had never been charged. I asked Jennifer to run to the other buildings and check their batteries.

Jennifer lifted her head from the table. "We, uh, already did that."

Amanda patronized like a schoolteacher. "I am nothing but a helpless female, but could it have anything to do with snow covering the solar panels?"

Sometime before the sun reappeared, we'd have to clear snow off the roofs so the batteries would charge. There would be no more electricity until then, which meant no lights and no water, either, since the pump operated electrically. In addition to everything else, we now had to pump water by hand and carry the buckets inside.

"There's the wonderful nineteenth century, for you," I steamed at Abigail, who found the whole thing amusing. "Welcome to Utopia."

The other men and I worked from ladders with brooms to brush off the solar panels—difficult and hazardous work, balancing with numb feet on those roofs without scratching or otherwise damaging the panels or killing ourselves. Hagerty had been a high-steel erector and stepped along the roof ridges like a gazelle. Our hands and feet frozen, we cleared the other roofs and solar panels in turn and switched all batteries on "charge."

However, it snowed again the following day and the day after that. Some evenings, we could do little more than gather around Anomalies' fireplace exhausted and disappointed. The temperature dropped into the low teens, and there wasn't enough firewood to heat the other buildings. Several of the men winterized the water pipes. The only ones who didn't mind the cold were the alpacas. We avoided each other's eyes as we ate our ever-shrinking meals. At night, we slept on top of tables, under tables, and hunched in the corners in our winter coats and alpaca fiber hats and mittens, those of us who had them. By the next morning, the roofs would had to be cleared again.

♦ ♦ ♦

The cutting cold of late fall had stripped the leaves from the branches, rendering the trees as jagged charcoal strokes against a floor of pink and black litter. The monotonous rubine wash of foliage that we used to complain about was way preferable to those black streaks.

One dark, cloudy afternoon Abby and I were walking past the ice-frosted woodpile, where we came across Jeffey seated on a snow-covered log, crying. Abby sat beside him.

"What's the matter, little one?"

He sniffed. Rolled his eyes up to her. "I want the sky back blue. And the trees back green and all the flowers. And the animals. Where are all the animals?"

With no words for a hopeful future, Abby could do little more than hold him close and cry with him.

"I don't know, Jeffey. I'd tell you if I knew, but none of us knows."

The hours of daylight shortened as we performed our chores, passing each other wordlessly with baskets or pulling wagons. Some cried. There were so many things to cry about, such as emptiness of sky and heart and a sense of collective shame about what had happened to the world.

As December dawned, Mickey loudly kept us apprised of the dwindling supplies.

"We're down to one barrel of apples," she grinned with self-satisfaction. "And you're not going to like dinner much without onions."

"When do they run out?"

"Yesterday."

Abby asked quietly. "What are we going to do, Luray? I haven't had a shower in a week—I can't live this way. *I can't."*

"At least we all stink equally."

The men worked together to heat bath water for the lady folk, and for that they were extremely grateful. Then it was back to chopping wood and carrying water. Back to shoveling snow and putting up the last of the vegetables. Back to the icy twenty-foot ladders and snow brooms and fingers and toes that never lost their numbness. Beards grew long. Patience, scarce.

Twelve

Mayday

WELL INTO FRIGID DECEMBER, we spent most of our time gathering firewood and keeping the solar panels clear of snow and ice. But that's when something new set in, something Hermes called "cabin fever." Ever since we put up our camouflaging barricades, we hadn't seen a single new face since the patriot militia. We had begun to tire of each other's frowns and annoying idiosyncrasies. Eyes averted eyes. Certain people avoided sitting next to others. The Man of Law and Amanda Hagerty blamed each other's politics for the end of civilization. Beecher blamed them both. Blake Hagerty got red in the face every time he saw Tillie and Connor, who one day just couldn't take the jeers and anymore.

"Listen, you homophobic dickhead," Connor told him. "I'm gay, and I'm not going anywhere."

Tillie put her arm around his shoulder.

"Me, too, Mr. Hagerty. Just as gay as can be. And what are you going to do about it?"

Jennifer stood with them.

"Dad, hate destroyed the world. It's got no place anymore."

Amanda and quiet Claire joined them. She gripped Jennifer's shoulders and squeezed.

"It's time for a truce with—everything that we don't like. None of it's important anymore."

Hagerty swelled with indignation, while the rest of the villagers wished they'd all just go away.

Abigail said, "No hard feelings. We're all just so tired of it."

Hagerty lowered his eyes. Squeezed his lips together and nodded.

"What does that mean?" Connor wanted to know.

Amanda gripped her husband's shoulders and smiled.

"It means a lot," she said to Connor. "A lot."

Coming out seemed to relieve tension for Connor and Tillie. As for the rest of the villagers, we had more important things on our minds. The Man of Law frowned painfully, but said nothing.

♦ ♦ ♦

We were hard pressed to keep ourselves entertained. We played the old 78 rpm records on the Victrola. The records were mostly popular songs, early jazz and blues, and opera stars of days gone by. Adding to the general ennui, the women had knitted up the last of the alpaca fleece and other yarns we'd traded for. We'd read all the books in our library at least once. The bicycles had worn off our two decks of playing cards. At one point, the adults had appropriated the children's travel games away from them and, in violent arguments, broke them, including the Etch-a-Sketch and the Rubic's Cube, which no one could solve but Grigny and Jeffey anyway.

"Great," mumbled Claire Hagerty. "The grownups broke all our toys."

Jennifer scoffed, "You can't trust them with *anything."*

"That's for damn sure," mused Hermes Dill, squinting outside in mock pain.

It's not that we didn't have chores. Jason took good care of the alpacas and, whenever possible, took them to places where the wind had blown the snow cover off last year's grass. Before we ran out of yarn, Beecher was so bored, he learned how to crochet, though nobody made fun of him for obvious reasons. We ran out of coal weeks before, so Conner tried to recruit Abigail and me to bring him firewood, but we could no longer afford to burn it in the kiln. He was uncharacteristically cooperative about it.

"Of course," he agreed. "It only seems right."

We kept Connor's beautiful ceramic bowls and cups in the dining room ready for trading. Next year, we planned to venture out like traveling tinkers, selling knitted goods and pottery from village to village.

The severely lame Hermes Dill, whom everybody loved for his wise, quiet ways, spent many hours off by himself in the freezing barn seated with saws and knives making parts for the old farm equipment. Having been homeless, Hermes was the only one of us who had brought warm winter clothes. He also restored some old leather workhorse harnesses, though the closest thing we had to workhorses were the alpacas. He fixed some old sets of snowshoes, which we found useful for gathering brush and limbs for the fireplace and stoves. *Permelia Lyttle's Guide* had warned us to prepare, and we had, but only within the limits of our TV-deadened imaginations.

The men's beards and hair grew long and straggly. Clothing that had torn in the rigors of farm work showed patches or sloppy mending—no one cared how they looked anymore. For cleanliness, we had to take warm sponge baths on a schedule, as hot water had to be heated on the stove—the batteries just couldn't take heating that much water, and the kitchen came first. Some of

us stopped bothering to wash at all. One night I saw our group spread around Anomalies' wide hearth lit by the flickering flames of the fireplace and some lanterns. From the window, I observed a tableau worthy of Matthew Brady, one of bearded men and long-skirted women that was beautiful to behold.

♦♦♦

Anyone who had completed tenth grade knew that less sunlight reaching the ground meant less photosynthesis. Less photosynthesis meant less oxygen, so we reasoned that, too, must have contributed to the cabin fever. Connor suggested that it was the cause of our collective irritability. However irritable we were, we got downright hostile the day Mickey told us that we'd run out of flour. Not only that, but the remainder of the cornmeal was moving on its own, owing to the bugs and worms that had made a home in it. We were down to mostly turnips, with some butternut squashes, a few potatoes, dried herbs, and the brown apples at the bottom of the barrel. At each discovery of some other crisis, Hermes just smiled, scratched his beard, and raised his bushy eyebrows. A loud "I told you so" didn't need to tumble from his lips.

Mickey was making miracles with the turnips. She baked them, mashed them, stuffed them with squash, and, for a change, stuffed the squash with the turnips. We wouldn't have our own fresh produce until June at the earliest. With a river running partially around Dunkard Bottom, you would have thought fish to be a solution. However, the fish we caught were deformed and ulcerous—the meat full of tumors and smelling of metal. The toxic discharges and agriculture runoff upriver was a hundredfold worse than before the Snap, as no one had stayed behind to control it. We had no way of testing our well water, so we imbibed on our nerve.

The chickens had died in the Snap, so there had to be another solution to the food problem. Beecher had a revelation.

"I say we eat one of those alpacas over there. See how they taste."

Jason showed his teeth, and so did Tillie and the vegans among us.

"No way!"

For all the fleece they gave, there wasn't much of a critter underneath it all anyway. The subject was closed.

"Well, we have guns," said Hagerty. "We can hunt. I hunted when I was in high school."

Always the school teacher, Amanda interrupted.

"I would like to pose a question to the class. Can anyone remember the last time you saw a deer, a duck, or rabbit?"

"Sure—just the other day I—" the Man of Law paused. Touched a finger to his lips as he tried to recall. "Uh, no. I'm mistaken."

"There's no birds, neither," Hermes added.

It appeared that no one could remember seeing any wildlife since the Snap.

"I did." It was Abigail. "I did see an animal."

"When?"

"A week ago, I guess. It was a skinny little doe. She let me come over to her in the woods behind the cemetery and pet her, but she was—I don't know, sick, shivering."

"One sick deer," Beecher noted, twirling his finger in the air. "Dinner is served."

We continued to ration our meager stores and the food got plain, flavorless, and the portions small.

Conversations went like this:

CONNOR: "Are you going to pass the salt down here or keep it for yourself?"

HAGERTY (throwing the salt shaker into the corner): "What salt?"

JENNIFER TO TILLIE: "You got more bread than me."

TILLIE: "You're smaller. And children should be seen and not heard."

JENNIFER: "'Ya smolla'—learn to talk English, will ya?"

AMANDA: "Not nice, Jennifer. Now, apologize this instant—and I want it sincere, Missy."

FLEETA TO BEN AND EDWINNA: "If you play *Those Were the Days My Friend* one more time, I'm gonna puke." (This earned whistles and applause all around.)

That same cold windy night, we were feeding the fire when someone announced that the firewood was gone. Nobody wanted to go out into the sleet to chop wood, of course. The women asserted that they were excused because of all the domestic work they did. Hagerty and Georgie had head colds—they had used up all the cold medicine Tillie heisted from the drug store. So much for anyone else in the future. So that left me, Beecher, Connor, and the Man of Law. We went out to do our duty, pissed off, yelling and throwing things, but we did manage to supply enough wood for Anomalies' hungry fireplace for another night and day. From then on, Anomalies became the public house that it once had been, a foul sanitarium of dirty bodies, coughs, snores, and farts.

♦ ♦ ♦

One thing we didn't need was an irritating new mystery. Abigail had noticed that books were missing from the library that no one had signed out. We

asked around at dinner one night and no one would own up to it.

"Come on, everyone. This is no joke," grumbled the Man of Law. "I want to read *Treasure Island* again."

Abigail was fuming. "We are missing a lot of our dog-eared paperbacks. All my Jane Austens."

Someone sniped, "Who would miss them?"

Eyes scrutinized. Noses twitched.

Next morning, Jeffey tugged on my coat. He wanted to whisper into my ear. I leaned down and he told me that he saw Mr. Miggs sneaking books out of the library.

I deputized Beecher to accompany me over to the pottery, where we caught Connor red-handed tossing books into the kiln.

Beecher grabbed his arm. "Connor, it's you!"

"Well there hasn't been enough wood!" Connor complained. "In order to create, I must have fire. These burn great."

"But Connor," I reasoned politely, "screw your creations. You burned my copy of *Fahrenheit 451*. Don't you see any irony in that?"

We convened a tribunal at which the community made him promise not to burn any more books. It was at that same meeting that Abigail made a big mistake. In trying to help us all with the food problem, she revealed a secret she had kept since we built Dunkard Bottom. I loved her, but she could be impractical.

"Listen, everyone. The fact is, I have a few supplies. Some food supplies that I put away in the store cellar for a rainy day."

Fleeta hollered, "You have food hidden away that you didn't tell us about?—"

Hermes took control. "Would y'all just quit grousing and go take a look?"

Several of us descended upon the store basement. In a small locked storage room, we discovered a stack of sealed boxes.

"I'm sorry I didn't say so before," she apologized. "But I wanted to see just how far we could go on our own—and then I guess I forgot about them."

Looking forward to a great meal, we opened the boxes. However, the "food" wasn't exactly food: cornichons, cured Moroccan olives, cocktail onions, tins of roasted peppers, anchovies, and jars of capers and pimentos.

"There is nothing of *substance* here," shouted the Man of Law. "These supplies—are for a goddamn cocktail party."

We brought the cases of luxury items to Anomalies and placed them on the table in front of Mad Mickey. We backed away as her squinty eyes shifted from left to right. The bump in her lip worked overtime.

Hagerty smirked, "Abigail, you would think this is food. Look at this crap.

You'd think she would have put aside some buckets of grain, for cripesakes."

"Not so fast," grumbled Mickey, looking intrigued. "This is all edible. And it has flavor. It'll help for a while. These little onions will make the turnips taste better. And we can use the oil from the olives for cooking—allow us to fry for a while. Go on, stack these cases in the kitchen, if you can find space."

This was facetious, of course, because the kitchen was empty.

Ben held up a jar of capers. "You know, you upper-crusters are all alike, with your causes, and your dabbling, and your parties. I bet you've never been hungry a day in your life."

Abigail thought for a moment. "I guess you're right, Ben. I-I'm sorry. I've done the best I could."

Hagerty said, "I try never to be one to point fingers, Miz Abigail, but as good a job as you did restoring the buildings here and giving them solar panels and all, you are certainly no survivalist."

Tillie backed her up. "We already ate through the veggies we put up a month ago."

"I know that. I'm sorry, I—"

Ben muttered, "Visitors took a lot of the food, too. 'Sure, come on in. Have a bite to eat. Take some for the road.' Then there was the militia."

"Well—I'm sorry."

"Will everybody just please calm down?" Hermes finally spoke up. "I hope to remind you that if this woman hadn't restored Dunkard Bottom here, y'all would be worm food in Piscataway or Hagerstown or some damn place."

My tolerance for people browbeating my wife had reached an end.

"I think we might be forgetting an awful lot," I said. "None of us had any experience in farming except Hermes. He's the only real farmer here. He told us back in the spring that we planted late. And we've made plenty of mistakes—every one of us, because we just didn't get it."

Abigail sulked, and I wished they'd all just keep their mouths shut, but Hagerty still wasn't satisfied.

"All I'm saying is she did a half-ass job. Half-ass!"

I lunged at Hagerty, but it wasn't just Hagerty that drove me to it. It was everyone and everything. I hurled myself over the table and flailed at him, sinking a solid punch into his shoulder. I had him on the floor while Jennifer and Amanda beat on me.

"Stop hitting my daddy!"

The Man of Law, who never took sides in arguments, tried to pull me off Hagerty, and that's when hell broke loose. Beecher grabbed Connor and shoved him into the wall. Amanda called Willow Ann a slut and Willow Ann

smacked her in the face with a mushy squash shell. Tillie grabbed Willow Ann by the neck with one hand and slapped her back and forth with the other, complaining, "Blimey, woman, you have no bones."

Even the little children were punching and kicking each other.

Suddenly a terrifying holler. "All right. Everyone sit down."

It was Mad Mickey, who wielded a cleaver in one hand and in the other a twelve-inch chef's knife.

"I've killed line cooks for less than this. Y'all act like rejects from San Quentin."

She was right, of course. They pulled me off Hagerty and sat me in a chair. We glared at each other, heaving for breath.

"Y'all calm down, here and now." Hermes thought we needed a sermon. "Tempers are short. We're tired of each other's company and out of food—except I guess we could throw a wing-ding of a reception. But we either have to go begging from the local farmers or just agree to be miserable. But fightin' wastes energy, and you're gonna need it for chopping wood—tomorrow. And this means everybody. Don't you fools realize we've still got months to go?"

We sulked at our tables, pouting and seething like ten-year-olds. We'd been reduced to irritable maniacs. We had, in fact, become dangerous to ourselves and others. This was the truth-bearing moment of harsh reckoning. I, for one, just didn't care anymore. No one else did, either.

"Look, Hagerty, I apologize," I said, disappointed that I'd lost my temper. "When I was trying to kill you before—it was nothing personal." He rubbed his shoulder and lifted a finger, nodding an all clear.

"Listen everyone," I continued, "we are alive, but I think we're far from okay. I think September was the end of the world we knew. The end of a lot of things. Of electronics and rabid consumerism. The end of the internationalist power elite. The end of the rat race. The end of instant information. The end of oil wars, the corporate military, interchangeable parts, modern dentistry, mass production, and ten-thousand years of war—"

"Luray? A little more positive please?"

"Well there is also the plus side," I hastened. "No more advertising, target markets, data collection, phone marketing, political campaigns, spying, fast food, actuaries, the health insurance scam, drug testing on citizens, and the lying media."

"Luray, down boy," said Abigail, however, others encouraged her to stuff a sock in my mouth.

A disgusted Hermes laid his crutches on a table and sat. "Today we looked into each other's faces and didn't like what we saw. But we were looking into the mirror. We do not like what we see. We aren't fighting each other—

we're fighting ourselves. So maybe this, right now, is our last chance. Maybe we have to choose between becoming like those killers who attacked us, or growing the hell up. As individuals and as a community.

"We are cut off by mountains, and blocked roads, and snow mounds. So for us, this village constitutes our entire world. Our universe. The only universe we can do anything about. And if we don't figure out how to respect each other and do a little sacrificing for our mutual survival, we will no doubt kill each other off long before spring. The next time you feel like clockin' somebody, just remember that's old-world thinking. We want to say good riddance to the old world that the fanatics destroyed."

Unsure of his own words, Hermes glanced from face to face to see if he had made any sense. Amanda applauded him.

She murmured, "Thank you, Mr. Dill."

Abigail sat with me and kissed my cheek, but no one said a word for an intense long time.

Finally, Connor put another log on the fire. "Everyone—I just wanted to say I'm sorry about the books. I realize I hurt all of us by taking them. It won't happen again."

With that crisis solved, another waited right behind it—a crisis that would hit very close to home.

♦ ♦ ♦

It happened the very next night during dinner. The meal had been unexpectedly delicious. Mickey made sliced turnips and herbed potatoes fried in pimento oil with capers and little white onions. With almost nothing to work with, she'd outdone herself with what she sarcastically described as the "Brimstone Luau."

By the time we finished eating, Abigail suddenly let out with a loud moan.

"Abby, what's wrong?"

She tilted on her chair and sank to the floor.

"Miss Abigail!"

Her eyes wide with fright, she gasped for air. "I—I feel—*awful.* Just terrible."

Tillie knelt down and examined her. Abigail's face was flushed red and her eyes glazed. She felt her forehead.

"Miss Abigail has a mile-high fever, I can tell you that."

"Is it the flu?" I asked. "Abby, do you feel like you have the flu?"

At first she nodded weakly but then turned her head slowly from side to side. Even Jason whined his concerned.

"No. I don't know."

"Tillie, please—"

Tillie sent Jennifer for a medical bag that she had assembled in the clinic room. When the girl returned, Tillie listened with a stethoscope to Abigail's heart and breathing. Bewildered, she took Abigail's temperature. She looked down her throat with a flashlight.

"Her throat is inflamed. But—I'm sure it's not the flu. Look at her ankles and wrists and neck—they're swelling up," she shrugged. "And this rash all around her neck. I don't know what this is. Scarlet Fever? Diphtheria? Rheumatic fever? We have no medical books. No Internet. All I can do is try the penicillin we nicked from the roadside chemist."

Tillie got the pills from her bag and made Abigail swallow one with water. As Abby gasped for air, Tillie sat back on her heels in resignation.

"I don't have enough training for this. We need a doctor." The frustration angered her. "I would rather be weaving than nursing. I burned out as a nurse. That's why I'm here."

I'd had no right to yell at her.

"Tillie, please."

Tillie tried to make Abigail comfortable. We pulled two stuffed chairs together near the fire and grabbed pillows that people had been using for sleep.

After an hour of no improvement, Tillie told the others to keep Abigail warm and called me back to the battery room.

"Luray," Tillie began, "I don't know what she has. But this fever will kill her if it gets any higher or lasts much longer. The penicillin is my only strategy."

We took turns holding cold cloths against Abigail's neck, forehead, and wrists, but her throat turned angry red and swelled. She could barely swallow. Her breathing turned into a shallow growl. I'd never seen anyone get so sick so fast, not even back in my homeless days.

Hermes had an idea. "What do you say we get on the ham set and see if anyone's giving out medical advice?"

I hiked across the frozen snow pack to the cold store with Willow Ann, Grigny, and Jason. Fortunately, the batteries were working there. The radio lit up, and we went to work in clouds of frozen breath. We were able to raise Dan Dade, but he explained that the medical situation was bad everywhere. He told us that a radio operator out of Omaha was hosting a medical doctor at irregular hours. We tried him, but the operator said he wouldn't have the physician on the air again for another week—he was working at a general hospital and they were overwhelmed with lines of people out the door, and the generators were low on fuel.

Abigail would surely never last a week. Next, Willow Ann tried the CB.

"Breaker break. Mayday. This is the Boneless Possum for anyone with medical advice. Mayday, needing medical advice. Over."

"Go ahead breaker, and hello-o to yo-o-ou, Possum. This is Festus the Bestest at your service. What kind of mayday you got? Over."

She asked if he knew any doctors in his area, but he told her he didn't.

"Sorry, we all in the same boat, Possum. We all on our own where doctorin's concerned. Best you don't cut yourself, don't break nothin,' and don't get sick. There's no workin' hospital closer than Warrenton, if you even have the gas to get there. I understand doctors are setting up in Snap houses here and there, but it's only by word of mouth. Over."

"I monitor you now and then, Festus," Willow Ann said. "What's your twenty? Over."

"Ooo—sorry. Out of time, sweet Possum. Got me a big 10-100. You can raise Ex Fed on the ham, if you got one. He lives over Warrenton way. Festus out."

He gave us the man's call number and frequency.

"10-100?" I asked.

"He, uh, had to go to the bathroom—but it also seems he doesn't want his location known."

Without a moment to lose, our girl engineer tried Ex Fed. Warrenton was an hour's drive on good roads. If we could get help there, it would be worth a try.

Fifteen minutes later, she raised Ex Fed, a quick-talking man with the clipped speech of the military.

"Yeah, Ex Fed here. There's a couple of doctors trying their best at Fauqier Hospital. Dr. Yon takes radio calls at midnight. You might get through to him then. Over."

At midnight, we hailed Dr. Yon, and within ten minutes heard his voice. Tillie explained Abigail's symptoms, and he asked if we could bring her there. She was too sick and the roads icy and dangerous. After we described the symptoms, the doctor wasn't very enthusiastic.

"Look, it sounds like septicemia from some type of infection. All I can do is give you a broad spectrum antibiotic."

"We have penicillin, doc," I interrupted him.

"If it's septicemia, it has to be intravenous and it has to be quick," he snapped. "Whatever she has could require any of several—I don't know. I've only got one I can give you anyway. We've got no supplies."

Willow Ann told him, "We could possibly bring you a blood sample for your lab."

Dr. Yon scoffed, *"Lab?* You've gotta be kidding. The labs are gone."

I jumped in. "Please, isn't there anything you can tell us?"

"If you can get here, I'll give you a drip bag. Get here as soon as you can. Just follow the agony, and you'll find us."

He wouldn't give us any more time.

Back at Anomalies, I asked Tillie, "What the hell is septicemia?"

Tillie's eyes flared. "A poisoning of the blood, I think. From an infection. My pills are—useless."

"We'll leave as soon as we can be ready," I told them. "We have to get going."

"Luray, we can't risk I-66," said Beecher. "Route 211 goes over two mountains and you know damn well it hasn't been plowed."

But I was not to be deterred. "We'll take the Land Rover. We'll keep it in four-wheel drive. We'll bring weapons."

The men exchanged glances, and I knew they thought it hopeless. But through loyalty to me and love for Abigail, they relented. We gathered what we'd need for the trip, including the guns and some food, and packed the Land Rover. The villagers took turns sitting with Abby, spooning water into her, and trying to cool the relentless fever. By the time the car was ready, she was slipping from consciousness.

Even the children were somber and afraid. A distraught Jennifer sat by her side. She gently laid her head on Abigail's shoulder and tearfully cupped her cheek.

"Please be all right, Miss Abby. Please be all right. You're our queen."

Fleeta sat in a rocker, her Bible open on her lap, her prayers barely audible. Hagerty apologized to her, though I don't think she heard.

Grigny was there, too, squatting in the shadowy corner staring at Abigail, his eyes wet and empty of hope. It was the way Grigny looked at her that scared me the most.

Thirteen

"The Bride Will Depart"

WE STARTED FOR WARRENTON in the tar-black night. I was determined to go the short way, the way we would have gone to Belvedere had the renegade mercenaries not blocked the road. Georgie had been down with a cold, so I appointed Hagerty, Beecher, and Grigny to go with me, no arguments, and a weapon for each, though Grigny wouldn't touch a gun.

"I can't kill another soul. Ever again."

The Land Rover churned around the barricades as the headlights illuminated scoops of real colors in the darkness. But the road beyond was already traced with two sets of snow-blown tire tracks. Where had the vehicles come from? Where were they going?

Beecher smiled, "The barricades worked. They never knew we were here."

We got as far as the turn off for Belvedere without seeing a soul. Only a mile later, however, we saw the approach of lights around a sharp curve. Two pick-up trucks mounted with tall bed caps cruised toward us. They slowed, the driver holding out his hand as though to slow us down to talk, but I drove on.

We crawled through creepy dark hamlets. It wasn't easy to keep the Range Rover on the road. I had to gun the engine to get running shots up the steep mountain roads. It all went well until the higher elevations, where the light snow hid the black ice beneath it. We fishtailed, and all four wheels spun as the men hollered instructions at me. All but Grigny, who I could see in the rear-view mirror, his face placid as he enjoyed the white-frosted scenery. He wasn't concerned at all. Hagerty and Beecher wouldn't let up.

"Take it in second gear Luray."

"Use the shoulder gravel. Get over. It'll give you traction."

"Will you guys shut up? We're O.K."

And we were, except that the down slope tipped steeper than I thought, and it was all I could do to tap the brakes and hope for the best. However, approaching uphill in the other lane was something we hadn't seen in months: a truck pulling a long dump body. On its way by, we saw the cover tarp lift just enough to see a dozen rifle muzzles. The driver trained a spotlight on us, but

as we passed them, nobody fired. I was relieved when we finally reached the bottom of the hill, but I could see fires up ahead.

"Turn off here, Luray."

It was Beecher, and I was inclined to agree with him.

Hagerty added, "Whatever's going on down there, we don't want any part of it."

The roads were less travelled in the piedmont, so in some places we found ourselves plowing through a foot of fresh powder. The next turn brought us onto another snowy road and the dinky village of Watkins Draft.

Beecher laughed, "Spoon River. Barely a speck on the map."

Hagerty defended Watkins Draft some. "Yeah, well Dunkard Bottom isn't even a speck."

The so-called town had maybe three streets, lined by a few blackened Snap houses and vandalized shops. We but rolled through cautiously and didn't see anybody at first, until Hagerty yelled.

"Luray, stop."

And I was glad he did. Not two feet from my front bumper stood a little girl in the headlights, wrapped in a gray blanket.

"Luray, don't get out," Beecher warned. "It could be a trap."

But Grigny muttered his first sentence since we left the village.

"It'll be all right," he said, his thousand-yard stare unchanging. "Ask her what she needs."

Why would anyone trust the crazyiest man in the village? Why would anyone bring along the hacker who started the war? It was because I trusted him. The child's lips were purple, her jaw shivering. A shock of her hair was matted with blood. With guns in hand, we got out of the Land Rover and approached.

Hagerty, who had more experience with children than I, knelt before her, took her by the shoulders.

"Are you cold honey?"

She nodded yes as I looked around for anybody else.

"Where's your mother? Your father?"

"They died."

"Do you have anyone here with you?"

She nodded. "No, sir."

Just then a woman's voice.

"Stephanie! Stephanie you *can't* wander in the road like that. We have to hide. How many times do I have to tell you?"

Upon seeing our guns, she retreated.

"Good Lord."

"It's all right, ma'am," I reassured her. "We're not going to hurt you. We're just passing through."

She timorously came and hugged the child to her side.

Still terrified of us, she begged, "You got any food? Anything you can give us?"

"You two living here alone?"

She shook her head. "Not alone."

She curled her lips and emitted a sharp whistle. Some doors opened. Hollow-eyed people emerged wrapped in blankets.

The woman continued, "Most of us died in—the thing. We was having our town picnic down at the grove. Having ice creams old Mitty made for us—everyone who went is dead now. A few of us didn't go, and we're still alive. Mister, we've eaten everything there is. We're afraid to go lookin.' The raiders—they killed three more of us. They—took children, Mister." She hugged Stephanie close, but with little emotion, added, "Just took 'em, screamin' and all."

I told Beecher to give them some of our food.

"Food?" protested Hagerty. "You crazy? It's all we got to eat."

Beecher barked, "Shut up, Hagerty."

We didn't have much—two squash pies and some apples. We gave them half.

"Look," I told them, "we have an emergency, and we have to be on our way. If we can, we'll stop back to check on you."

"Thanks, Mister."

"Flitch. Luray Flitch."

"We'd be grateful," a gaunt old man said. "These younguns have seen terrible things. Terrible things."

Stephanie stood shivering, her big eyes unblinking.

Tough guy Hagerty's eyes were wet.

"We can't take them with us, Luray," Beecher said. "You know that, right?"

Hagerty reflected, "This little town—it's us. It's Dunkard Bottom, but with no preparation at all."

Without much emotion, Beecher added, "They'll starve. Every last one of them."

Bearing no apparent relationship to the topic, Grigny blurted out something.

"I'd walk a mile for a camel."

I remembered the TV cigarette commercial slogan from when I was a kid. I regretted bringing Grigny with us. I shook my head.

"Beecher, give Grigny some water or an apple or something."

♦ ♦ ♦

We were only about fifteen minutes from Warrenton, when I stopped on a promontory overlooking a little cup of a valley between two hills. At the base was what looked like a gas station, a mom-and-pop grocery, and a few frame houses, smoke curling from the chimneys as though nothing had changed. Sleet fell.

I asked, "What do you think?"

"Looks innocent enough to me," Hagerty said. "But who knows?"

Grigny laughed as though it was the funniest thing anyone had ever said in human history.

"Grigny, shut up," Hagerty groaned.

Beecher asked, "Is Willow Ann teaching you anything?"

Grigny stopped to think about it. "Yes."

I consulted the map. "Well Warrenton is over that next hill, and we're here, so I'm going through."

I shifted the Land Rover into gear, and we descended the hill toward the buildings. Not quite at the bottom, however, some burly young men came out of nowhere blocking the way. They rolled a wall on wheels across the road.

"Back up, Luray. Stomp on it, quick, quick."

No sooner did I shift it into reverse, than another wall rolled into place behind us.

We were trapped.

We cocked our guns, but before we could raise them, we found ourselves staring down shotgun barrels.

The leader seemed to be a teenage boy with boils on his face. Needing to shave his first whiskers, he chewed gum and couldn't suppress a grin full of pride that he was in charge and had such power. The guns were all held by teenagers. Young country kids with their daddies' shotguns.

"Put 'em down and get out of the Jeep," he ordered.

"It's a Land Rover," snapped Grigny. "A Land Rover."

"Shut up."

We got out of the car and, without warning, the little bastards walloped us in the stomachs. On the ground trying to get my breath, what appeared to be a twelve-year-old girl with jaggy meth-head teeth jammed her shotgun painfully into my knee.

"Can I shoot his knee out, Nicky? I wanna shoot his knee out."

"Not yet, Grunt," Nick, the lead boy, smiled at the girl. "You are one crazy bitch."

Beecher lay face down in the snow, assessing the situation in disbelief.

"What you got in here, Dudes?" He yelled to his buddies, *"Search the Jeep."*

"It's a Land Rover," strained Grigny. "Rover-r-r-r-r!"

Which earned Grigny a rifle butt in the shoulder. He cried like a little boy.

"Wait a minute," I said, getting to my feet. "We've done nothing to you. We have an emergency. We have to get to Warrenton to get medicine for my wife. She's dying."

The little bastards all started mock crying and playing violins.

"Boo, hoo."

"I *wanna* shoot his *knee* out," said the girl they called Grunt. "They make such funny faces when ya shoot their knees out."

Hagerty couldn't shut up either. "Oh, go take a bath, you little freak—"

That earned Hagerty a rifle butt in the face.

"Benny, see if this thing drives."

A boy got behind the wheel and shoved it into gear. "Four-wheel drive, man."

"Pull it around back."

"Knees, *knees,"* whined Grunt, but then Beecher caught her attention.

She looked into Beecher's eyes. "Mmm. Nice. Can we keep him?"

"Your coats, too," Nicky ordered.

"Aw, come on," I complained.

"Fucking kids," Hagerty whispered. "They were vicious before the Snap, and now they're worse than middle management."

They took our coats, food, weapons, and vehicle, and I was seriously concerned for our lives. I went into panic mode over Abigail's plight.

"If you had a camel, you could ride out of here," Nick told us, as though intentionally talking gibberish. "But you don't, and my girlfriend here likes to shoot knees out and stuff."

Suddenly, I remembered what Grigny had said. Nick had made reference to a camel and, like dancing the jig in front of the killers at Anomalies, I had nothing to lose.

"I'd walk a mile for a camel."

The kids all laughed.

"Mister, you're crazy."

"Then walk," Nick ordered. "Walk. And we'll watch. Maybe use your ass for target practice."

"Aw, Nicky. *Please?"*

"My girlfriend—she was nuts before," Nick laughed. "I ain't foolin'. Too much meth for a twelve-year-old lamebrain—I told you to pace yourself.

We can't make any more of that shit." To us, he indicated with his shotgun, "Y'all better git before I change my mind, or she might just go bonkers on you."

Grigny didn't wait another second. He lit out across a small field toward the woods as fast as he could through the sleet, while I stood there like an idiot watching him. Beecher took off, too, and Hagerty shoved me.

"What are you waiting for, Flitch?"

The four of us ran across the field as shotguns blasted and buckshot hissing over our heads. I was just waiting to feel it in my back, but we made it to the woods line without being hit, any of us. Once in the woods, we kept running down a rocky embankment as the freezing sleet soaked our shirts and pants.

We made it to a smooth creek bed where the running was easier, but I, the oldest and the most out of shape, was the first to flag.

"They took our damn vehicle." I sat down in the snow. "Why did have to take our coats?"

"Why not? Come on, Luray. You gotta keep up."

"I can't," I wheezed. "Not anymore. Please. I'm freezing. I have to rest."

"Well around that turn then. We'd be an easy mark from the top of the hill."

Hagerty and Beecher looped their arms under mine and near dragged me another hundred yards, where I collapsed to the ground. I couldn't get my breath at all. Just couldn't, and thought I was going to die right there.

"Promise me, you'll take care of Abby, will you?"

Beecher got behind me and lifted me under my shoulders. Somehow, it gave my lungs more capacity. In a moment I felt better.

Beecher stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Cripes, I'm cold."

Hagerty said, "Yeah, well who isn't?"

But Grigny was staring at something. "Tires."

He'd found an old tractor path.

"There'll be a road," he said. "It will lead to a road."

"Grigny. Thanks for the camel trick. I still don't know why it worked."

"Why what worked?"

He had no idea what I was talking about.

Beecher threw his hands up in disgust. "Come on. We're going to freeze to death if we don't keep moving."

He was right, of course. We followed the tracks for about an eighth of a mile when we came to an old single-lane road blanketed under an undisturbed snow crust.

"Which way? This way or that way?"

Grigny pointed. "That way. Hurry. Hurry."

Hurry we did, and we had to take his sense of direction on faith. It wasn't long before we came upon a snow-covered vehicle, the snow had actually drifted inside the open passenger window.

"We could sit in this car here," said Hagerty.

Beecher grimaced. "And what, wait til spring?"

The car had an odd shape. It was quite old. Perhaps from the early fifties. At least I had the sense to search it for anything we could use. Even a blanket would have been handy.

I went around to the driver's door and opened it. It looked awfully familiar.

"Wait a minute. I know this car."

I brushed some snow off the roof. It was the old Henry J that my Uncle Gudrow had willed to me. The very car in which I had pursued the larcenous Professor Allard to recover Permelia Lyttle's manuscript.

"This is *impossible.* I abandoned this car two years ago, way down near Charlottesville. How did it get here?"

No one in my party was impressed with that startling problem, let alone the coincidence that we'd find it out in the middle of nowhere right when we needed it. Thanks again to Grigny.

Hagerty wanted no part of it. "Just leave it, Luray. We have to get to Warrenton, and then back to Dunkard."

Beecher interceded. "Well, why don't you try to start it?"

I winced. "Like it still runs."

"Well? Maybe it does."

I thought it was foolish to even try, but I got in. The key was in the ignition. I turned the key, and the engine turned over. I pumped the accelerator and tried again. It clunked a few times, but it started. It actually ran as well as it had ever run, missing, backfiring, and the fenders wobbling.

"Come on. Quick. Clean it off."

With the car clean of snow, we piled in. I put it into gear, but the tires spun.

"I can't believe this thing runs."

Hagerty threw some brush under the rear tires for traction, and after some rocking, we were free. We were grateful, too, for a working heater. We slid and fishtailed our way along the old road, carving our own trail through the snow. Now it was all about gas—we were either almost out, or the gauge was broken. Even if we reached Warrenton, would we make it back up the mountain in that old wreck?

I couldn't comprehend how the Henry J got to that road any more than how Grigny knew which direction to take in order to find it. Some desper-

ate traveler must have found the jalopy—and needed to get way up here. Why they left a working car deep in the woods was anybody's guess, but if they ran into the Acne Delta Force Meth Club up over the hill, that could explain it. As for Grigny, he continued to operate on some kind of jacked-up intuition. He rode in the back beside Beecher, his assigned 9mm pistol lying beside him on the seat, watching the scenery go by like a soldier on patrol.

♦♦♦

The rattletrap of a car finally got us to Warrenton, which was the largest city any of us had seen since the Snap. When we arrived at the intersection of Routes 17 and 29, I couldn't believe my eyes. What used to be a shopping center was burned and plundered. The parking lot was alive with looters, strewing glass, store fixtures, and torn up boxes everywhere. We kept our distance as I chugged on toward the hospital. Very few old cars were on the road. Some unsteady bicycles and motorcycles, and people on foot, a lot of them carrying guns—to defend themselves against people with guns.

I navigated around abandoned vehicles until we could see the hospital high on the hill. But up ahead was a formidable roadblock. Military trucks blocked the way with soldiers of some type—friends or foes?—you couldn't tell anymore.

Hagerty said, "They might be thieves. Mercs."

"Well, that up there is the hospital, Hagerty," Beecher observed, handing me his pistol. "You wait here. I'll go. If they knock me down, then you have to turn around and try another way."

Beecher may well have been trading his own life for Abigail's, and I was moved by his courage.

We watched as Beecher walked down the littered highway with his hands over his head. The men trained their guns on him. Holding our breath, we watched as they questioned him. After a moment, he lowered his arms and waved us on.

"You're cleared for the hospital—if you can get near it. You might want to leave your uh—vehicle—over there and walk up."

We followed his orders and plunged back out into the cold in our shirtsleeves. At least the sleet had stopped. On the way up the hill Beecher filled us in. The city had maintained part of its police department and gathered whatever army reservists who saw the wisdom of maintaining order. They were doing their best by not allowing any guns into the town proper.

The guard asked if we had any food, but I told him it had been stolen. Starvation was afoot across the land.

"I suddenly feel grateful for those goddamn squashes we complain about."

Inside the unheated hospital came a blast of shouting and screaming. The filthy halls and windowless rooms glowed with the wavering light of oil lamps. Amid all of it, an occasional nurse or orderly ran through in a frenzy, uniforms grimy with red and browning blood stains. We asked about Dr. Yon, but she yelled "I don't know." Someone finally told us, "Second floor, B Wing."

We found the line of agony all right. A queue of human misery the like of which I hadn't seen since the California earthquake back when we had television. Like everybody else, I was trying to jump line. I looked down to see what was so lumpy beneath my feet. It felt like a rolled up carpet, but it was an old woman. We—everyone—were walking on those who had died waiting in line. The press crushed my ribs, and I and my companions extricated ourselves into a stairwell.

Grigny, however, was grinning in the chaos as though he felt quite at home. He was holding up his fingers and shouting like a floor trader.

"Dunkard Bottom! Buying blood poison drips! Buying high."

He folded into the crowd and disappeared into the din.

"Great," complained Hagerty. "We'll probably never see him again."

Another refugee from the hall soon joined us, a short, rotund man with olive skin and large black eyes. He was sinking to the floor in pain.

"I just can't wait anymore."

Hagerty knelt by his side. "What is it, buddy? What's wrong?"

He told us his feet were infected and that he'd just live with it rather than battle the lines any longer.

"People have been in this line for days. They're dying here. Three doctors—for all of this? In Manassas they're abducting doctors. Kidnapping them and holding them at gunpoint."

We asked him about the food in Warrenton, and he told us the crops had failed in the drought. Millions of starving people and millions of starving livestock. The strictly licensed GMO seed wouldn't grow without the chemicals to go with it. Environmental karma had been instant: no chemicals, no food.

"Most of the crops were for feed anyway, not the dinner table. Alfalfa and corn. Soybeans. We emptied the stores and warehouses in weeks. They've been eating the cattle since the Snap—not many left, now. There was no planning. Not for anything like this. How could there be?"

The refugee told everyone who could to plant winter wheat until the seed ran out. Soy for human consumption, too. It looked like everyone would have to wait until spring for fresh food again. There was no way around it. Eventually, we would all be vegan.

"So where are you from?" he asked us, and we proved ourselves to be a trio of liars.

"Harrisburg."

"Winchester."

"Somewhere in New Jersey, I forget."

He smiled knowingly.

"Buddy," asked Hagerty. "You don't have any gas, do you?"

He laughed. "Gas? Are you kidding? The GI Joes down there are guarding the gas. Government use only."

"It's just that we have an hour's drive."

"An hour?"

"Two hours," Hagerty corrected. "Two hours due north."

He smiled again. Shook his head. "I don't care. Everybody in Warrenton has an emergency, and you don't even live here. You can forget gas. You'll never get gas."

Just then, Grigny burst through the doors heaving for breath.

"I've got it, Luray," he shouted, carrying a box with drugs, a couple of drip bags, needles, and tubing. "The doctor said since he can't see her, he has no idea if it's what she needs. It's supposed to keep the fever down. He also said give her a saline drip to keep her hydrated. He said, 'Start the drips, add the medicine, and you'll find out soon enough.'"

"Tillie will know what to do," Beecher affirmed.

We congratulated Grigny on getting Abigail's medicine. The man on the floor began shouting.

"You mean this guy got through? Hey, can you help me? I just need someone to look at my feet—"

But we were already flying down the stairs through the moans and yells of a suffering crowd. We hurried back down the hill to find Hagerty still waiting by the car.

Beecher chittered, "Who'd want to steal it?"

"Well it got us here, didn't it?"

I pulled the keys out of my pocket to check the trunk, just on the off-chance there was something we could use, and to our mutual surprise found a red plastic two-gallon gas can. I weighed it in my hand.

"Feels like it's full—I hope it's gasoline."

Beecher moved to grab it.

"Wait," Hagerty interceded. "Not here. They'll swarm us."

♦ ♦ ♦

The treacherous drive home taxed my nerves, particularly since we lost

the Land Rover. With it, we had lost our maps and our four-wheel drive. Adding to our problems was that we couldn't go back the way we came. We could not risk another attack by those meth-head kids, but it would also mean we couldn't go back for the little girl in Watkins Draft. She and the remnant there were beyond our help. They would fade from human memory, like millions of others in thousands of villages and towns and cities around the world.

A mile or two out into the country, we pulled onto an icy driveway where we poured in the gas we'd found. Two gallons were better than none. It was clear that whoever had driven the car from Charlottesville to Fauquier County had filled up. It was also clear that they drove it there before the Snap.

When we got back into the car, however, Beecher cursed under his breath. He couldn't get his leg comfortable.

"Wait, just wait a damn minute. There's some junk under the seat."

I stopped again at the side of the road, and Beecher got out and crouched.

"Just some old papers. It stinks."

He was about to heave the papers into the woods, when I realized what he had.

"Stop! Beecher, *don't throw it!*"

He handed them to me.

Hagerty stirred. "What is it?"

My heart raced. "These are the lost pages from *Permelia Lyttle's Guide*—from the original manuscript. We lost these, so they were never included in the book. Whoa—this is really something. See, Fluvanna Dumfries and I chased Professor Allard all the way from Gooseneck to the shadows of Monticello, and she must have left these—"

Beecher winced, "Do you suppose we could hurry it up?"

I laid the papers on the seat beside me and shifted into gear. Along that stretch of snow-packed road we saw a lot of horseshoe tracks. In a way, people on horseback could be more dangerous than those in vehicles. They could stop you, rob or kill you, and escape into the woods where a car couldn't go. We chugged along cautiously.

Climbing the mountain was dicey because the Henry J had only three working cylinders. It snailed us up the steep hills in first gear at twenty miles per hour. The engine screamed and knocked all the way, but we eventually found our way back to the mouth of Belvedere's driveway. We were already headed south when Hagerty picked up the manuscript pages.

I asked Hagerty to read aloud, hoping it would get my mind off Abigail.

"All right," he mumbled, and squinted at the pages. "This one here says they cut her mother's hair off on the road to some place called Tannery Fork. That around here?"

"No," I told him. "England. I never knew that."

"And some more about when she was a kid."

"Do those pages—happen to be blue?"

"Yeah."

"Then these were personal to Permelia, and not prophetic," I explained.

Grigny roused from his window daydreaming, and his face twisted in disbelief. He said nothing but listened intently.

Beecher prompted Hagerty. "More. Read some more."

"No more about her mother," Hagerty replied. "Here's some. But it's in—Greek or something."

"It's written backwards, like da Vinci's notes," I told him. "You need a mirror."

"Well I left my damn mirror home in my dressing table, Luray."

I broke off the Henry's rear-view mirror and handed it to him. He tried to read, but couldn't make it out.

Hagerty cursed. "Hell, I can't read this, Luray."

"Give me that."

Beecher grabbed the mirror and angled it to the pages. A suddenly attentive Grigny listened intently as Beecher read.

The demons shall devour:
Every family, farthing, and homestead;
Every poisoned acre and drop of foul water—

Hagerty grabbed his head. "Please, no more riddles."

Beecher continued reading to himself, and I could see in his eyes the fascination that I myself felt when I began reading Permelia Lyttle's words.

He asked, "What do you suppose this one means?"

After the Great Calamity
The Bride departs in agony
And leaves the Pilgrim's side.
His soul shall waken upon the night
When the Savage removes his mask.

Beecher asked, "Leave the Pilgrim's side?"

"What's that all about?" Hagerty asked. "Who's the Pilgrim?"

"That— would be me," I responded, my voice shaky. "In the Guide, I'm the Pilgrim. Abigail—the Bride."

I recited it for them:

When the savage removes his mask
And the women and children cry,
The soul shall know the truth
About the Liar and the Lie.

But these new verses turned my stomach. These messages were clearly about me and Abigail. It was personal.

"The bride departs in agony," Hagerty asked. "What the hell does it mean?"

Grigny spoke up. He glowered almost angrily, "I know what it means. Miss Abigail, she—"

"Shut up," I hollered. "Don't read anymore of it. Put it back under the seat where it came from—please."

"Luray, that doesn't mean Miss Abby's going to—." Beecher clammed up a moment. "It can't mean that. No old time fortune teller could know a thing like that."

I gestured at the pink burned out world around us. "Yeah, right."

"Shit, Luray," reassured Hagerty, "it don't mean anything. That old lady didn't know about modern medicine."

Grigny was the only intuitive among us. He rested his hand on my shoulder.

"The savage has yet to remove his mask, Mr. Luray Flitch."

No one said another word, but my heart pounded with a dour possibility. Had Permelia foreseen Abigail's death? Could those pages have helped us if I hadn't been forced to leave them in the Henry J?

Grigny squeezed my shoulder, and my head suddenly filled with the image of Abigail's smile. The sun on her face under the blue sky in the garden at Belvedere. Her graceful limbs weaving in the moonlight. Her white skin dewy in the night air. Also her smarts and talent and her inexplicable and improbable love for me.

In my mind I thanked Grigny for that lovely vision. In my head, I thanked him for his compassion and encouragement that Abigail would survive.

"You're welcome," he said aloud.

♦♦♦

When we arrived back at the village, however, two grim-faced Hagerty children loitered in the cold air on the porch, and I knew by their faces that Abigail had not improved.

Fourteen

"The Bride Will Depart"

BY THE TIME WE RETURNED to Dunkard Bottom, Abby's fever had risen another degree. Her breaths were frighteningly shallow. Tillie quickly rigged the drips, hanging the bags from a wooden coat rack. But Abigail suffered terribly that cold afternoon. If the drips were going to work, it was taking too long to find out. We took turns sitting with Abigail, hoping for any sign of change. By the darkness of late afternoon, the rash, the sweat, and delirium of the fever had all but taken her. The unspoken nearness of loss congested the room, and I just couldn't watch Abigail or the others any longer. Useless with worry, I fumed out into the cold in my shirtsleeves. Tillie came out with me, rubbing her arms, her eyes streaming. She opened her lips, but words came hard.

"Luray, medically speaking, we're back to the 1930s here. Abigail simply can't take another day of this—no one could. I am so very sorry, but it's up to Dr. Yon's medicine now. We've done all we can."

Tillie hugged me. If I lost Abigail, there would be no future for me. Not in Dunkard Bottom or anywhere else.

"Sit by her, Tillie. Okay? Go on."

I didn't tell her or anybody else what Beecher had read in the newly discovered manuscript pages, that the Bride would leave the Pilgrim's side. I refused to believe it. I walked icy Needful Lane unfeeling of the bitter wind. I applied myself to checking the bridge and the mill. I climbed the icy hill to count the alpacas and hiked to the barn to kick the tires on the tractor. A light snow wiggled in the air, so I returned to Anomalies feeling sick myself.

In winter, the night began around four o'clock. So, once again we gathered at the tables, where the only sounds were the crackle of the fire and Abigail's shallow breaths. We couldn't believe she was still hanging on. The villagers took it all badly. Eyes avoided eyes, stealing quick glances at the sad corner where Abigail lay so still beneath her blanket. A worried Jason lay curled up on the floor beside her. Mickey put out dinner, stopping for a moment beside her, fists on her hips and shaking her head—even Mickey dropped her tough attitude. She gently took Abigail's hand in hers and gave

a squeeze. She tossed off whatever she was feeling with a shake of her head, and returned to the kitchen.

After dinner, Tillie's face was a knot of resignation. She sat across from me and gripped my hand in hers.

"Luray, I am very sorry. But I'm afraid we must face the inevitable. Poor Abigail will surely leave us any time now."

I could barely squeeze out, "You did all you could."

I must have been delirious. I saw myself standing in the middle of the room, imploring each of them for help they could not give. Willow Ann hugged me, tears on her cheeks.

"Oh, Luray—"

She patted my cheek and inched toward Grigny's corner. "Grigny, you have to do something. You're a prophet."

His eyes hung down with guilt. "I am no such thing. But I wish I was for Miss Abby's sake."

Hagerty grumbled, "Well you're the closest thing we have to one."

I clung to the hope that Grigny yet might help. As the fire hissed and guttered, I kneeled on the floor in front of him.

"Grigny, you could be Abby's only hope."

"Don't say that. You can't put that on me."

Amanda whispered, "We need a miracle. We need a healer."

Grigny was matter-of-fact. "Well, I'm not the healer that she needs."

"I'm begging," I said. "I am begging you in every way I know to at least try."

Wincing in resignation, Grigny scraped to his feet. Tears trickled, and he kept opening his hands, his lips stretched in pain. He stooped beside Abigail and gingerly laid his hands on her head. He wept all the harder, touching her like that. But all of a sudden, he jerked. His eyes flared, and he jumped back.

"Grigny, what's the matter? Did you see something? What did you see?"

But he only backed away.

I grabbed him. "Grigny, what did you see?"

His face twitched with regret. Tears streaming, he approached me. Grabbed the fabric of my shirt, and seemed to hyperventilate.

"I didn't give up. It's you. You gave up."

"What are you talking about?"

Grigny cried pitifully, but said no more.

Resigned to Abigail's death, I sat beside her to say good-bye. I could not bear the pain straining her face, but I stroked her damp hair and attempted to memorize every feature so I would never forget her. I, too, was dying by the minute. I believed that she had never truly suffered a day in her life, until she

came to Dunkard Bottom. Her damp skin glistened in the firelight, a reminder once again of making love by the fire at Belvedere. For us, time had stopped for days and nights at a stretch. Dances in the cool spring air. Abigail was my kite, only bound to earth now by a fraying thread.

I smoothed her brows. She was no longer conscious, but I took her hand in mine and squeezed. I lowered my lips to her ear.

"Don't leave me, Abigail," I whispered. "You're my dance partner. My dreamer. You've never backed down from a challenge, and I'm telling you now to wake up. I love you more than I even know how to say—."

My throat caught, and I could speak no more. I kissed her forehead.

I realized that the room had fallen silent save for the fire. I turned only to find them all staring at me, their eyes full of tears and pity, but empty of hope. I never exposed my feelings to people. Ever. I had to get out of there. I hurried back outside into the dark where falling snow tickled my face.

Wrapped in the glove of night, I observed the buildings and how the window light threw yellow rhomboids across the indigo drifts. Someone had left lights on in the schoolhouse—kids. My shoes squeaked over the snow-pack as I walked over there to turn them off. I was too scared of losing Abigail to care about the cold. I was more frightened than the day I found myself homeless. More scared than when my parents died and even after the Snap. Abigail had been my North Star. The one who had rescued me from all that. Abby was my eccentric, flat-broke, philanthropist wife.

I recalled our summer night dances among the fireflies and sculptures of Belvedere. I remembered seeing her through the window of her studio, nearly buried in scraps of fabric, bent over a sewing machine late into the wee hours. Our garden, and meals, and nights watching the pin-light stars wheel overhead, and the moon telling its monthly stories.

I loved her bigger than I ever thought love could be, and I was overcome with anger.

"Why?" I shook my fist into the blackness above me. "You can't do this to me!"

Fleeta Laine's prayers played in my imagination. I'd heard her pray at the burials or when she thought she was alone in the orchard. She had faith in the things unseen that was written about. I was troubled enough believing what I could see, but the world was fresh out of options. And Grigny's accusation echoed: "I'm not the one who gave up. It's you. You gave up."

Grigny was likely telling the truth. He could no more prophesy than I could bring Abigail back from the edge of death by snapping my fingers.

"All right, Grigny. Have it your way."

I turned my face up into the falling snow and gave it a try.

"Please help my wife," I prayed into the snowy void, uncertain of my words. With all the gumption of an orthodox agnostic, I begged, "Please. You didn't interfere when we destroyed our world, but you have to help Abigail. We don't have a doctor. Or medicine. You can't just be mysterious on this. Not anymore. You have to help her and me, too. And the struggling people in this stupid little village."

I switched off the lights in the schoolhouse and headed back toward Anomalies. As I reached the steps, however, I saw something in the snow that stiffened me with fear. In the snowy powder were several sets of fresh tracks—snowshoe tracks.

The tracks bypassed the porch and continued around the corner on the mill side. Fearing another gang of killers, I opened the Jeepster door, grabbed a pistol we kept there, and cocked a round into the chamber. I walked quietly to the corner of the building and stopped short: directly in front of me were three terrifying faces—long, dark-skinned faces, angular of nose and narrow in the eyes. Black braids protruded from their furry hooded coats. One wore a balaclava.

Indians.

Without changing his expression, the tall one gently slipped the pistol from my shaky hand. He put the safety on. The second man stood beside a woman, and all three carried heavy duffel bags.

I asked, "Wh-what do you want? We don't have much here."

The man with the gun stepped toward me, I put my hands up.

"Inside," said the tall Indian in a deep voice. "Inside. *Now.*"

I about-faced and led them onto the porch. They kicked off their snow shoes and entered Anomalies behind me. Seeing me with my hands up put everyone on alert. Jason barked madly.

I backed away from the Indians, but the tall one handed my gun to Hermes, who seemed embarrassed.

Hermes said, "Luray. I think you can lower your hands now."

I did as he asked. Beecher quieted Jason.

Hagerty enunciated loudly and slowly with accompanying hand motions. "What-tribe-are-you-from?"

Bunching his black brows in disgust, the younger man glanced at the others. He removed the balaclava and said, "Chickahominy."

The older man corrected him with a chastising tone. "Eastern Chickahominy."

The woman added, "And Scotch-Irish mix."

"Speak for yourself, Heinz 57," pouted the younger one.

Adopting Hagerty's interrogation technique, Fleeta asked loudly, "Can-

you-tell-us-your-names?"

The woman stood erect. She banged her fist to her chest and extended it out straight.

"I am called Wincing Moccasin."

But she sputtered, and all three cracked up laughing. They'd been putting us on. They laid their heavy bags on the floor near the door and threw back their hoods, which we could now see were standard Walmart issue. The men introduced themselves as Howard Shepherd and Thomas Bright Eagle. The woman gave her name as Bluebell Marks.

She spotted Abigail over near the fire with Tillie in a chair beside her. She must have noticed our faces.

"And what have we here?" she said. "This doesn't look good."

"She has a dreadful fever, I'm afraid," Tillie wept. "For two days now. We've done everything we can."

Bluebell took the cloth and knelt by Abigail's side. She rinsed it in the pail and felt Abigail's forehead and looked at her wrists and ankles.

"Ooh—. Well this is not good at all."

Abigail lay so still, I thought surely that she were already dead. We would soon be digging a new grave in the cemetery beneath the willows.

♦ ♦ ♦

As Bluebell examined Abigail, the men sat down with Hermes. Mad Mickey brought them cups of soup without being asked, and inched over to watch. Bluebell looked into Abigail's throat, tsking. Tillie offered her a flashlight, which she declined.

Bluebell was around forty, with dark clear skin, pretty outlined eyes, and three tiers of beads close around her neck. From her belt, she took three ancient-looking hide bags and laid them out on the floor. From one, she chose a wilted sprig of something and twisted off a piece. From another, she poured a tiny pyramid of powder into her palm.

"Somebody make a tea of this."

"Tea." Mickey responded. "Coming right up."

Bluebell dumped the ingredients into Mickey's hand.

"Crumble it all up in the water—this makes six cups. Boil it fifteen minutes. After that, we pour it into her, every drop."

Mickey took the ingredients back to the kitchen with her, as Bluebell asked, "You have any brandy?"

No, we didn't.

"We have some Jack."

"Heat a cup of it and mix this in." She handed Tillie four small leaves

from the third bag. "Quickly—just very hot, don't boil it. Then strain the leaves out and throw them away. Hurry."

While the remedies were being prepared, Bluebell rinsed out the cloth and wrapped it fresh and cold all around Abigail's neck and throat. I told her Abigail's name, and she placed her hands on her face and closed her eyes.

"Abigail has deer drop fever."

Beecher said, "I used to hunt, but never heard of anything like that."

Bluebell explained politely.

"That's partly because people don't live in the woods anymore, and partly because the deer herds have never been this sick before. Abigail must have picked up something outside that a sick deer dripped on. She caught this from a sick deer."

"She touched a sick deer," I admitted. "About a week ago."

Bluebell shrugged. "Bob's your uncle."

Thoughtful Howard Shepherd spoke in low tones.

"There's very little meat because of the sickness. The animals got it from the polluted water. The White Sky killed all the game east of the mountains. And the stupid white people—no offense—don't know how to preserve meat, so they kill for dinner tonight then kill again for dinner tomorrow. There's almost nothing left on the hoof that you can eat. White people eventually waste everything they have—no offense."

Hermes thought this was pretty funny, but giggled to himself.

Thomas Bright Eagle was a well-muscled man around thirty. He added, "You might even say that you white people just wasted your entire freaking civilization—no offense."

Amanda was irritated. "No offense taken. But this is no joke. It's the end of the world, we're talking about here."

"End of the world?" Thomas shrugged with incomprehension. "Been there. Done that. Our world ended in 1646."

Tillie interrupted. "Wait a minute—this tea. How do you know it will work?"

Bluebell smoothed Abigail's hair back.

"These herbs have been medicine to our people for centuries."

"Centuries?" Hagerty butted in. "Just when did your people first come here, anyway?"

Thomas Bright Eagle regarded him incredulously. "We've always been here."

Mickey brought out the hot whiskey mixture, and Bluebell held a spoonful of it under Abigail's nose. She coughed from the strong fumes.

"Atta girl."

"Stop that!" Tillie protested. "What are you doing to her?"

"She has to breathe these vapors. Unfortunately, it hurts like hell. But look. It's pulling her back into her body."

She gave Abigail another whiff, and she coughed again.

"Back into her body?" I asked. "What do you mean by that?"

"She's already slipping into the happy hunting ground, if you don't mind an old cliché."

Tillie sank to her knees.

"You mean Abby died?"

Howard Shepherd lit a pipe and puffed out a blue cloud. "My daughter-in-law is a medicine woman. Let her do her medicine."

Bluebell scowled, "Just *shut* it, Howard."

She placed a few drops of the whiskey mixture on Abigail's tongue, and Abby woke into a groggy half-awareness. More drops went down and Bluebell was able to give her a teaspoon of it. Abigail coughed in agony.

"This will also help numb her throat so she can take the hot tea."

Tillie was impressed. We all were.

After three spoons of the hot whiskey medicine, Mickey brought out the kettle of tea medicine and a cup. Bluebell got Abigail to swallow a teaspoon of the tea and showed Tillie how to feed it to her quickly without drowning her.

"Until she can drink from the cup, that's how it has to be—one spoon at a time. You have to get it all into her and don't mind her complaining—it's hot and tastes gross. It'll take patience, but it has to be as quickly as possible."

They placed the whiskey preparation and teapot near the fire to keep them warm, and, in disbelief at what we had witnessed, we took turns dripping the tea down Abigail's throat. Half alive was better than not alive.

♦♦♦

By three in the morning, Abigail's temperature had dropped three full degrees. Tillie was astounded by Bluebell's craft and asked her to explain what the ingredients were. Some of the plants were edible and some not. One was deadly if you used the wrong part or used it the wrong time of year. One ingredient had narcotic properties, and one was from the flower of the Jimsonweed. Tillie wanted to learn all about native medicine.

"But what are the plants *called?* I want to know their *names."*

Bluebell smiled. "I could teach you if you like."

"I would be ever so very grateful."

"British, huh?" said Bluebell. "You won't be the first British medicine woman in these parts over the last three hundred years."

Howard winked at wide-eyed Jennifer. "Course, most of them we had to kidnap."

We heard the first laughter around that place in weeks. In the meantime, Bluebell was admiring Tillie's shawl and Abigail's blanket, which she kept stroking.

"This is amazing soft. What is it?"

"Alpaca fleece," Tillie told her, proudly holding out the shawl. "We make them. I used to be a nurse, but became a weaver. And I guess a nurse again, though not a very good one, I'm afraid."

Connor smiled. "We get the fleece from the alpacas that white people abandoned in the hills here." He had said "white people" as though he weren't one himself.

Hagerty told Connor to shut up.

Bluebell said, "In the spring, I can show you other natural fibers that spin well. But I want one of those blankets—it's gorgeous."

"How about this?" Tillie took off the shawl she was wearing. "Here. I want you to have it for helping Abby."

"Nonsense," said Bluebell. "I don't charge for medicine. Let's trade. Can you use some cornmeal?"

Many heads nodded.

"Thomas, give them some cornmeal."

"Oh, great. Give them our cornmeal." Snorting his displeasure, Thomas opened one of the big duffels and pulled bags of flour out of the way to find the cornmeal.

"How about two of meal and two of flour for the shawl?"

Tillie agreed.

Thomas said, "What do me and Howard get?"

"Breakfast tomorrow morning?"

Though it was way past their bedtime, the children shyly gathered around the Indians' table, where they asked questions about them and their tribe. It turned out the Indians were educated, but hadn't worked in white industry for two years prior to the Snap because of jobs going to Mexico.

Thomas said, "When our investments collapsed, we pulled out of everything."

Bluebell rolled her eyes. "Our chief brought the tribe together to learn all we could about the old ways."

"Well I miss Home Depot, I can tell you that," Thomas complained.

Beecher asked, "Who is your chief, anyway?"

"Howard—he's the chief."

The kids, and more than one of the grown-ups, were entranced.

I had a question. "Do you mind my asking, where did you get that cornmeal and flour?"

"From Festus, of course," Thomas replied. "He's got plenty."

"Festus?"

He was the local CB operator we'd heard.

Hagerty squinted with evil on his mind. "We'd like to trade with him, too, if we could."

"I don't see why not," Howard said. "Before the Night of the White Sky, he had to keep it a secret. No taxes. No licenses and all that. But none of that matters now. He doesn't live far from here."

I said, "In the morning, we can drive you back to your cabin or lodge, or whatever."

Bluebell smiled wryly. "A three-bedroom, two-and-a-half bath lodge with a walk-out basement on a half-acre lot. And boy are we glad the Great Spirit in his wisdom saw fit to cancel out our mortgage."

The Indians bedded down with us, which they said was not unlike the way the Indians lived in the lodges of old. I insisted Tillie get some sleep and took over tea duty. An hour later, Abigail roused to something like consciousness.

"This tastes horrible. *Horrible."*

"You can have it by the spoonful or you can drink it from the cup," I told her, "but you have to drink all of it. You have about two cups left."

She asked me to help her sit up. Her wrists pained her, but the swelling was going down. I held the cup for her, and she began sipping from it with my help.

I was afraid to believe that she was recovering, but I'd take it. My eyes wet, I whispered, "Abigail, I'm so glad you woke up. I don't know what I would have done if I'd lost you."

Her eyes told me she wanted me to hold her, which I did as gently as I could. She was damp and hot and quivering in my arms. I kissed her forehead. With tired eyes she looked up at me and attempted a smile.

"Where have you been, Luray?"

♦ ♦ ♦

When the Dunkard Bottom tribe stirred awake next morning and got to their feet, doctors Bluebell and Tillie clocked the fever at 99.2, and everyone in Dunkard Bottom applauded. Abigail ate a piece of cornbread that Mickey had made, a cornbread that even impressed the Indians.

"Use stock instead of water," Mickey told them. "It's easy."

I explained to Abby how Bluebell had saved her life. "You would have been gone if Bluebell hadn't come."

Abigail gripped the woman's hand. "Well, thank you, Bluebell Marks."

Bluebell squeezed her back and smiled.

Abigail told her, "You could charge a lot for that kind of medicine, you know. There's hardly any of our doctors left. Make a fortune."

The other Indians shook their heads in disgust.

"See, that's partly how you ate up your own world," Bluebell gently chastised. "There's no charge for my medicine. Wouldn't you do the same for me? Or would you demand my insurance card, a co-pay, and impose a high deductible?"

Abigail understood. She shrugged, slipped her hand into her pocket, and handed Bluebell a nickel.

"It's the custom here in Dunkard Bottom—the Nickel Standard. They don't have any value. It just means thank you."

I approached Fleeta a little sheepishly. "Thanks for your prayers, Fleeta."

She seemed relieved by my words.

"Of course, Luray. We all love Abigail. Even though we complain."

I didn't explain my own angry prayer outside in the snow the night before. I didn't even wonder if Bluebell had been the answer. Gave Fleeta a hug.

♦ ♦ ♦

Next morning, the Indians stepped out onto the porch to leave. Hagerty, Beecher, and I joined them, and a phrase played on my mind. It was the phrase we saw in the new Permelia papers:

> After the Great Calamity
> The Bride departs in agony
> And leaves the Pilgrim's side.
> His soul shall waken upon the night,
> When the Savage removes his mask.

Abigail had certainly departed in agony, and Bluebell had brought her back. And if my hollering at the sky the night before meant I'd awakened, then so be it. Hermes had once said that the phrase referred to a Hopi prophecy. But could "savage" have referred to Indians? These Indians? In Permelia's day, they likely still called Indians savages. And what of the mask? Was it when Thomas removed his balaclava the night before? Or was it the mask the savage white race worn for three centuries? And there we were. They had saved Abigail, hadn't they? They had awakened me to a higher power. And we would surely be needing their help again.

The Indians were strapping on their snowshoes, but Bluebell winced.

Thomas White Eagle pouted. "You have to walk with us, Blue. You have to."

"Uh, no. Nope. I don't think so. Not today."

Thomas continued. "The chief says we have to study signs. Signs, we have to study. In the snow. We have to trudge through the woods checking signs—with the chief."

Howard shut his eyes like he was counting ten. "You are cruisin' for a bruising,' young brave. I've told you, it's time to take back the world that was taken from us. Embrace the old ways. The white man's fast-food has made you weak in the head. You are, in fact, the most embarrassing son a chief could ever have. You should be staked out on an ant hill, actually, and left to die."

Bluebell cleared her throat. "Howard, if you're quite finished building up White Eagle's self-esteem, I'd sure like to get home sometime today."

Disgusted, Howard looked at me. "You can't live with 'em and you can't live without 'em."

"I hear you, chief," I said.

"Try running a tribe sometime."

"Somehow, I think I am. Though my performance review's going to be a bitch."

The Indians declined the ride home. Under Howard's insistence, the three trudged north on their snowshoes beyond the barricade, and out of sight.

Fifteen

A Bear Runs Backwards

IT WAS LATE DECEMBER before Abigail got back on her feet. We'd all been giving her extra food. Even the kids made her eat to build up her strength. Bluebell stopped by at irregular times, her smiling eyes peering through Anomalies window and flashing a dimpled grin. She'd tiptoe over to Abigail and squeeze here and there, hold her face just so, and examine her eyes. She'd tell her "smile at me" and feel her pulses.

Tillie was amazed with Bluebell's storehouse of medicine and techniques. The Indian medicine woman usually came alone, and Tillie would take her aside and monopolize her, asking a thousand questions. I overheard Bluebell discussing antiseptics, analgesics, and astringents, and heard her explaining the virtues of ginseng, black birch, and witch hazel. She told Tillie she could begin teaching her specifics in the spring when she would take her out into the woods and show her how to identify the plants and how to pick them. Tillie was in awe. We were awfully glad to have Bluebell as a friend.

One afternoon, Beecher, Hagerty, Abigail, Tillie, and I drove Bluebell back to her house, navigating snowdrifts, fallen limbs, and ice patches, while keeping a lookout for cars, horseback riders, and hikers. Around one turn, was the wreckage of a large military helicopter. Bluebell told us, "Don't look," but we did anyway, only to see black turkey vultures picking over the bones in the snow-swept field. However, dozens of houses and farms near where she lived were still standing, though she said only two were occupied. In a ravine was an overturned school bus. She told us it was a sports team returning home from a game. All dead.

We weren't prepared for the next perplexing sight. In an open meadow between two stands of forest, we saw a bear shaking his head and running backwards through the snow.

"A bear running backwards." Tillie laughed. "I thought I'd seen everything."

Bluebell frowned chastizingly. "Her brain is poisoned. You see animals do a lot of crazy things these days. They did before, too. It made people laugh, then. But not anymore."

I whispered, "They ruined just about everything that could be ruined."

We pulled into her driveway, and Abigail welled up. She didn't have the words.

"I'm still grateful that you saved me, Bluebell."

Bluebell grinned and gripped Abby's hand.

"I think you're worth it," Bluebell said. "Just promise that we're all going to be really good friends."

"For the remainder of our days," I snarked. "However long that is."

Remembering that Bluebell had gotten their grain from Festus, I asked directions. It wasn't far from there, and we easily found it. Curious to finally meet the CB voice we'd been monitoring, we idled cautiously along the ruts of the driveway toward the dark red two-story cottage. Behind the house was a three-car garage.

We knocked, and the door opened almost immediately, only to reveal our own Mr. Miller.

I was first to speak. "Mr. Miller, I didn't expect to find you here."

But he was stunned. Nervous. "Yeah, well, this is my house. Why wouldn't I be here?"

"We're looking for someone named Festus—to buy some flour."

Abigail put two and two together.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Miller. Is your first name is Festus?"

Beecher pulled out his pistol and pushed his way into the house. We looked around and found the rooms packed with stuff—food, clothes, and general store merchandise. In one of the bedrooms was a woman in a housecoat and hair net—his wife, we gathered—at the CB mic conducting negotiations.

"Fifty pounds. But the price is double from last year—10-7, 10-7—. Damn it Festus, who are these hillbillies?"

I charged, "We're just the people you've been stealing flour and meal from since last spring, that's all."

"Festus, I told you not to trade with Indians. They must have told them. You can't trust Indians."

"Hell and damnation, Berta, stifle it."

Beecher pushed the gun at Miller. "Suppose you show us around your warehouse."

"Now, wait a damn minute here. This is private property—you can't just look around as you please."

Beecher cocked the pistol and motioned Miller outside. He grumbled all the way to the garage. He hesitated a moment, then lifted one of the garage doors. We were astounded at all the stuff they had: coffee, tea, salt, sugar, screws, and nails. They had baking powder and cooking oil, brooms, and

hardware. Canned goods. Coils of chain and rope. And they also had eight pallets stacked waist-high with fifty-pound sacks of flour and cornmeal.

I was infuriated. "Mr. Miller, you have been stealing from us right along—and from all the other farmers around here, too."

He pleaded, "I gotta make a livin,' Luray."

"Beecher, put the gun away," I told him. I said to Miller, "Don't you know you can make a better living trading with us than stealing from us?"

He squinted his eyes.

"Beecher, back up the Jeepster—we're taking what's rightfully ours. And we're taking some for Mr. Vogt, too, and will tell them what's been going on."

"Aww, Luray. You aren't takin' it all, are you?" Miller sniffled.

"No," I said. "Just enough to keep us and the Vogts and a few others from starving for a couple of months."

The man reddened. Knowing that the mill wouldn't open again until the winter wheat came in May, I asked him a question.

"Tell me, what did you do before you came to Dunkard Bottom?"

"In the before times, I brokered in the winter. Consulted to mills down south and in the Midwest. But after them flashes—we got scared, me and Berta. No Internet. No phones. Hardly any way to sell it off other than the CB. Say, uh—does this mean I can't be your miller no more?"

The question provoked contemplation. "The citizens of Dunkard Bottom will have to decide that. We'll ask the Man of Law about it. Unfortunately, we have no jail, which is where you belong."

We loaded several bags of flour and cornmeal into the back of the Jeepster and returned to the house. I was more angry at him than I had been at my first wife. But there had to be a better way than punishing the man. Maybe we could make our enemy our friend, depending on if we could prevent the citizens of Dunkard Bottom from tearing him limb from limb.

Mrs. Miller gave us fresh ground coffee. That coffee was the best we'd had in a long time. On our way out, Abigail spotted something.

"Look here—it's the prism from my armillary!"

Sure enough, there it was.

"So it was you who wrecked my armillary!"

Mrs. Miller shrugged sorrowfully. She handed the prism to Abigail. "We just wanted the prism. We were going to sell it on E-Bay. But then the whole world crapped out."

Beneath snow clouds and fighting an increasing wind, it took us a good part of the day to deliver flour to Mr. Vogt and the surviving neighbors, none of whom bore malice toward Mr. Miller—the Lord shall have a talk with Mr.

Miller in his own time, we were told—but they were grateful for the flour.

♦ ♦ ♦

We returned to Dunkard Bottom in the snowy late afternoon to find the village once again in some type of crisis. Anomalies was strangely alive with hooting and hollering, and we braced for the worst. There were no vehicles around, so it was unlikely a mobile force.

Abigail grabbed one of the shotguns. "Well if it's that illiterate militia again, I'll grease them myself."

Beecher and I led Abigail and Tillie as we cocked rounds into our weapons. We stealthed over to the door, and Beecher shoved it open. Our senses were assaulted by some type of ragtime rave party with a Jelly Roll Morton tune scratching from the Victrola. The tables had been shoved to the side and the room was alive with sordid merriment. Willow Ann and Ben seemed to be the DJs, but the kids were out of control.

They were drinking beer and whiskey—the very whiskey Bluebell had used to help cure Abigail. The air was pungent with the smell of marijuana. Grigny was by the window doing some type of Mick Jagger impression. Hermes and Mickey lolled gleefully by the kitchen pass-through, he in his wheel chair with a bottle of Jack in his arms, and Mickey with her arm around his neck. He waved a goofy hello. Jeffey, Claire, Jennifer, and Georgie were swilling suds and playing poker. The Man of Law and the other adults were conspicuously absent.

"Have you all lost your minds?" I shouted. "Willow Ann? Ben? Hermes?"

Tillie's jaw hung open. I didn't think she was breathing.

Jennifer yelled, "Cheerio, Tilleroo! Hey, it's Mr. Flitch and Miss Abigail!"

As soon as they saw us, Willow Ann let out with a wee-haw! and threw herself at Beecher, wrapping her legs around his middle, and smooching his face like a cartoon rabbit.

"Get down, girl. Down, now."

Abigail ordered, "Willow Ann, *heel!"*

Georgie and Jennifer were plastered, pretending to be Las Vegas high-rollers. A tipsy Jeffey shuffled cards behind a mound of nickels.

"You want in? Seven-card Texas Hold 'Em. Nickel no ceiling."

Young Claire offered us beers. "Brewskis for the Flitch-skis."

Horrified, Abby snatched the beer out of the child's hands.

"Uh-uh, girl. Guess again."

"Rats."

Jennifer slurred, "Pour Tillie two fingers of JD—let's see if we can grow some hair on her chest."

Tillie scoffed, "The cheek!"

"Now—all of you," I ordered, "stand over there."

Abby grilled them. "Jen and Georgie—for heaven's sake, Claire's only eight! Put those beers and cards down—*now!*"

I switched off the Victrola.

"Aw, don't stop the music." It was Ben. "It's New Year's Eve."

Georgie raised an index finger. "Or was recently."

"Where are Connor and Edwinna? Ben, you're an adult—why did you let eight- and ten-year-olds drink alcohol?"

A red-nosed Ben teetered toward me like a spring breaker.

"Aw, they're all right. Hey, no more laws, Luray. We're free. It's 'year one' of the brave new world. Come on. The party's just starting to roll."

Abigail hollered, "This party is over!"

Hermes tried to conceal the bottle in his arms. He sniffed it and grinned some more.

"Hermes Dill—there are little kids drinking, and you're drinking right along with them."

That registered in Hermes's eyes after a moment, and he nodded yes, his head a bee swarm of conflict. He shrugged, "It's always been my weakness. Once I start, I can't stop. I'm just as sorry as can be. To be in this state. As it were."

Mickey shrugged. "Hell, they ain't my kids."

Just then, Blake and Amanda came in carrying firewood, stomping snow from their shoes.

"What the hell's going on here?" Hagerty demanded.

Amanda grabbed Claire by the shoulders. "Claire Hagerty! You're drunk! Jennifer, how could you let your sister—"

But at that moment, Jennifer covered her mouth. She ran for the back door in time to throw up in the snow. A head popped up behind the kitchen pass-through. The Man of Law had been cowering there.

Abigail said, "And you—you're a lawyer! Why didn't you stop this?"

The Man of Law lifted his hands apologetically.

"Technically, I didn't see the harm in letting off a little steam. As for the children—I deferred to their parents' guardianship. I'd like to remind you, however, that there are no laws against it anymore."

"Yeah," I countered. "But there's still common sense."

Fleeta came in the side door just then, carrying three split logs.

"What happened in here?"

Edwinna and Connor were right behind her as Ben explained.

"Hey, I never told these kids they could drink."

Georgie objected. "You didn't tell us not to. Besides, I must at this time defer to counsel."

Moon-faced Jennifer, back from barfing, kissed him on the cheek.

"Turn your back for five minutes—" Fleeta declared, then took charge. "I want you two in separate rooms until you sober up."

Starry-eyed with inspiration, Willow Ann ruminated, "We could be like one of those communes of the seventies. You can't legislate morality. Not really. Right?"

"Sure you can," said the Man of Law. "Moses did. When he came down off the mountain, he found something like—*this*—going on."

Hermes scratched his beard, "Only a lot worse."

The Man of Law pressed his hands together. "After the Snap, order itself broke down. I counsel that we convene a legislative session, and then talk about what happened here."

The partiers groaned in unison. "Not a meeting."

"Yes, a meeting," Tillie was angry. "You people aren't using your brains. Think of the medicinal value of this whiskey you drank. Now we won't have it when someone gets sick."

"Oh."

We agreed to convene the next morning and cleaned up the mess. We locked up the remaining booze with the ammo.

Hagerty pressed his lips together. Spread out two fingers pointing at his kids.

"To your rooms. No squash. No TV."

Everyone paused while that sank in.

Grandma Fleeta ordered her grandchildren to their rooms as well. Willow Ann followed orders like a punished child. So ended the Dunkard Bottom New Year's Party. No one was hungry anyway.

♦ ♦ ♦

Later that night, a frowning Abigail lay in bed covered to the chin with blankets.

"I am so disappointed in our people, Luray. All those years, until I met you, I was living in a dream world. People can be despicable, untrustworthy liars."

"I was always distrustful of people," I admitted. "When I was with the *Washington Post* they called me the Spook."

She cried softly to herself.

I laid down beside her and cradled her head in the crook of my arm.

"I guess we've both learned a lot. Utopia requires organized, motivated,

and disciplined people. You can't expect them to be something they're not. Tomorrow we have to set up rules. After tomorrow, things will be better. You'll see."

♦♦♦

We didn't exactly know how to conduct a legislative session, but we started by moving some tables around and lining up Anomalies' mismatched chairs in three rows. We made a lectern of apple crates on the musicians' platform. We had no gavel, so we used a rusty ball-peen hammer. Everyone in Dunkard Bottom attended, including the children and Mr. and Mrs. Miller, who huddled shame-faced near the back. I was glad they came, though others weren't pleased. Our new Native American friends Chief Howard, Thomas Bright Eagle, and Bluebell Marks also attended.

The first rule of order was that only one person at a time speak and that person had to address the group. The Man of Law set forth our tasks.

"We still live in Virginia," Abigail began. "Should we adopt the laws of Richmond?"

The lawyer orated, speaking lawyerly for the first time since he moved in. "Last I heard, Richmond was burning—again. We aren't technically a state anymore or a country. There's no constitution. No president. No governor. No mayor. No system of rules. We have no law enforcement and no laws to enforce. We have no judge or jail, and no penalties for anything. Connor burned up *Robert's Rules of Order* in the kiln, and I can no longer sue him in small claims court for emotional distress.

"It's interesting that any state that still has a working government after the Snap can lay claim to any territory it wants. For example, there's no one to stop us from capturing—say, West Virginia or Maryland—and declaring Georgie the king. King George the First of the Dunkard Empire."

The Man of Law explained various forms of local government from which to choose, keeping in mind that until someone told us otherwise, we were no longer beholden to state or federal oversight. The confused militia that had come looking for Follett didn't count.

"So, do we call Dunkard Bottom a township? A municipality? A borough?"

Thomas Bright Eagle raised his hand. "Suppose you call it a reservation."

Chief Howard elbowed him.

The Man of Law continued. "Perhaps we should write a simple charter that suits our needs. We can amend it as needed. Under the charter, we'd be able to vote on laws and come up with some type of council or a board with a chairperson."

Attendees grumbled about this, especially the young people.

"But we don't want a government," whined Georgie. "Why can't we just be free?"

"Anarchy for one and all!" chanted Jennifer.

"Yeah!" echoed eight-year-old Claire. "Ankarny."

But Hermes strenuously objected. "You really don't want anarchy, Miss. You aren't old enough to remember Rwanda. Read about Berlin at the end of World War II. And we saw a taste of anarchy here not long ago. All anarchy means is that you do what the men with the biggest guns tell you to do. Anarchy is no kind of freedom."

"Live and let live," said Edwinna. "Couldn't we just go by that?"

Abigail raised a point. "If living free means a dozen people decide it's okay to guzzle all the medicinal liquor at one party, it would be a form of freedom for them, but it would be a form of oppression for everyone else. It would take away their freedom to be cured."

The millennials shut up.

"Not to mention giving alcohol and marijuana to children fifteen and under," noted Tillie with a chastising squint. "They're going to be in charge of all this one day—though I admit we haven't set a very good example. Mr. Miller was expressing his freedom by helping himself to extra flour and meal—looking out for himself, and a way to survive until the mill starts up again. But we all nearly starved. That denies us our freedom to stay alive."

The Man of Law summarized as he made notes. "So—we can all have the freedom to pursue happiness as long as it doesn't infringe on someone else's freedom to pursue happiness. Does that sound fair?"

Everyone agreed.

"Looks like Dunkard Bottom has the first plank of a charter."

"How about a vote?" asked Hagerty. "I mean, there needs to be someone in charge of meetings. I don't know if I want a lawyer in charge of our town—no offense."

"None taken," he smiled. "No, I can best serve this town as a citizen advisor on, say, a five-cent retainer."

People snickered.

Hermes had a suggestion. "What if we had a five-member council whose chairman was elected by the group—the kids vote, too."

I felt inspired to add, "And what if each citizen served on that council in rotation—say everyone twelve and over."

The kids groaned.

"Seriously. We all serve on the council for two months and elect a new chairman every two months or so—but it would be staggered. That way ev-

eryone gets to see how hard it is to run this place."

Abigail got to her feet. "When there's a dispute or a crime—*Mr. Miller*—the council comes up with a fair recommendation and the town votes on it. No judge or court—Anomalies is our courtroom."

Everyone liked these ideas and the Man of Law wrote everything on a legal tablet, which to us seemed justification enough to make it all legal.

The Man of Law added a codicil. "Why don't we try it for a year, and then decide if it's working or we want to change it? Jefferson encouraged frequent rebellion."

Everyone applauded. Together, we came up with a list of laws, which even the children added to:

No assaulting
No spitting
No cursing
No giving liquor to citizens under eighteen
No going into somebody else's room uninvited
No deliberate irritating of the women
No deliberate irritating of the men
No playing with kids toys unless you're a kid
No disrespecting of any kind
No stealing
Alcohol is medicine and go easy on the Johnny Appleweed
For all the rest, consult Holy Books

We all knew what could happen if we didn't do our share of the work, so, on the advice of counsel, we passed no law pertaining to work. However, we agreed to hang a sign on the wall above the pass-through, reflecting the view of one of the first Virginians:

"If you don't work, you don't eat."
—Capt. John Smith

Beecher asked, "So what's next?"

The Man of Law scratched his jowly neck thoughtfully. "There's a whole library of traffic laws and ordinances we don't need anymore, at least not yet. Same with counterfeiting and bank robbery—I think the door to our nickel hoard is never locked anyway. But, we oughtta have a rule about firing guns anywhere on our property unless provoked by evildoers."

The Man of Law continued. "Anything else, we can add by looking

through these." He held up two huge brown volumes of the Statutes of Virginia. "The boys picked these up in Front Royal. Someone was using them as wheel chocks. In the meantime, I'll draw this up in large, friendly letters. With our town charter and the beginning of our own statutes and ordinances, we'll be the Village of Dunkard Bottom—a proper civic entity." His mind was racing with possibilities. "Eventually, we could annex the rest of Virginia, Maryland, and North Carolina, if we want to. But maybe we oughtta wait until next year for empire-building. I love this. I feel like the founders must have felt."

The citizens hooted and whistled.

We next voted in the first council: Abigail, Hermes, Hagerty, Tillie, and me. They aggravated me no end by designating me its first chairman. The Indians rubbed their eyes and shook their heads in misery.

Thomas White Eagle spread his hands imploringly to the sky. "And the white men form a new government upon the land. I feel safer already."

Tillie dropped out so Thomas Bright Eagle could serve. He had a degree in Economics from William and Mary.

The first order of town business was how to deal with Mr. Miller and his wife. The Man of Law urged us to consider in a future meeting such things as legal representation and rules for conducting a hearing, but since we had so few citizens, fair trials would have to be subject to our collective wisdom or prejudices.

The trial of Miller v. Dunkard Bottom didn't take long. Mr. Miller pleaded not guilty on the grounds that Dunkard Bottom had no law against stealing when he committed the acts. The Man of Law countered that the damaged armillary was discovered just before the Snap, so he was guilty under Virginia law.

"Then let Virginia try me," said the miller.

Absent any kind of commissioned judge, Amanda Hagerty declared a mistrial, and we figured that was as good an outcome as any.

We discussed Miller's crime and his plea. Finally, they said they were sorry and threw themselves upon the mercy of the citizens. As a body, we decided to forgive them, as long as they didn't mind some probation and surprise inspections of their home and garage.

"Mr. and Mrs. Miller, please approach the crates—I mean the bench."

They did so, hats in hand, mouth-breathing and nervous before our collective eminence.

I spoke for the council. "We've all discussed what you've done, and, well, we're going to let you off with a warning. You've agreed to our inspections, and you're free to go as long as you promise to stay on as our miller."

Thomas Bright Eagle offered a suggestion.

"Suppose you go legit?"

The Millers looked at each other, mystified.

"What do you mean legit?"

"Open a trading post in one of the abandoned Snap buildings. Move all your stock in there and set up a trading post like in the pioneer days. Paper money wasn't trusted back then, either. Let people barter for what they need."

Berta Miller bunched her lips thoughtfully. "Maybe that ain't such a bad idea, Fes."

The miller said, "It won't be Walmart, exactly but it'll be a start."

Abigail added, "Of course, you're welcome to stay and have some lunch before you go."

They were grateful for our generosity and, I might add, a measure of wisdom from the Native Americans.

"Is there any more business before the council?"

"Yoo, hoo." Willow Ann timorously twiddled her fingers. "What I'd like to know is, who's gonna do the marrying?"

Everyone looked at me. Several simultaneously said, "The Man of Law."

Embarrassed but proud, Beecher squeezed Willow Ann's hand.

"With Mrs. Laine's permission, Willow Ann and I want to get married and move in together over at the schoolhouse."

Dead quiet followed.

Fleeta thought a moment and shook her head. "I never much liked you, Beecher Simpson, but you've proved yourself to be honest and responsible. It doesn't make sense not to. Yes, you may apply to be my grandson-in-law."

This produced whistles and applause.

"That's good," Willow Ann added, "cuz we're going to have a baby, too."

We applauded again as Fleeta nearly fainted. With an open docket, they could have any wedding date they wanted—Willow Ann would be a May bride and Fleeta would read from the Bible.

Hermes winked. "You might be performing more weddings than you think."

He hooked his arm around Mickey's, but she yanked it away.

"Wipe that grin right off your face, Dill, because it ain't gonna happen."

I scanned the citizens of Dunkard Bottom and the pairings seemed inevitable. Tillie and Connor had become friends, but there'd be no marrying or even cohabitation for them. Georgie Laine, now seventeen, and Jennifer Hagerty, newly fifteen, had begun acting in concert of late, even squabbling like married people. Jeffey and Claire played under the willow tree talking for hours on end about nobody-knew-what.

Abigail later nodded with certainty. "Edwinna's baby is coming soon, Luray. You know, it's the babies who will carry on. Everything we do from now on has to be for them."

I saw the wisdom in it.

Mr. Brown and his son, Tyrone, who had created Abigail's armillary, came by and rebuilt it good as new. We invited them once again to join us, but they politely declined.

"We've gotten some work converting electronic cars to analog cars," Mr. Brown said. "We're also restoring horse-drawn carriages."

Tyrone said, "They'd look great with flames."

Mr. Brown countered, "And yet, they will have no flames."

The prism threw its spectrum for us once again, though much weaker now, that we so sorely missed. We danced in the concentrated hues: red, yellow, green, blue violet—just seeing them allowed us to smile a little.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was much relieved the day I turned my chairmanship of the Dunkard Bottom Supreme Council over to my successor, Hermes Dill. We were also pleased that Chief Howard agreed to rotate onto the council as a member. Upon reflection over our first ten months in the village, I felt moved to speechify.

"This may not have been the end of the world, but I think we can all agree it was the end of the world we knew. We have to find a new way of thinking—it can't be like it was. We can't think and talk like we once did—not anymore. If we hope to survive, we have to practice higher principles and value each other more than our individual selves. We used to be cogs in someone else's machine. Now we're leaves on the same tree. It's the only way we're going to survive."

No one argued.

By the first week of February, we were in better shape food-wise than we had been in December, owing to the Indians, our trade agreement with the Amish, and getting back some of Miller's stolen goods. Like most survivors, we had started from scratch with our hands and wits, only we had an advantage. Thanks to Abigail Lind Flitch, we had Dunkard Bottom.

By mid-month, we were enjoying a warm spell that opened some grassy patches in the snow and asphalt on the roads. Tillie, Abigail, and I decided to venture over to the newly opened Miller's Trading Post. We encountered only two delays on the road. The first began with three shrill whistles. I steered the Rolls to the side of the road as a juggernaut of fifteen bicyclists sped by in tight formation on expensive racing bikes in matching tights and helmets,

just like any bicycle club before the Snap. They wore matching backpacks, too, but also shoulder holsters with pistols at the ready. The group passed swiftly in a whir of thin tires on bare pavement.

The second interruption we saw from a distance—a two-car collision at a crossroads. I hid the Rolls at a safe distance, and we watched through the foliage. Like any accident before the Snap, the animated drivers pointed and shook their fists—it was a family man with his wife and kids, and a tall, thin man alone. The altercation went on for five minutes or so until the family man pulled a handgun from his jacket pocket and shot the skinny man in the face. His head jerked back and he dropped to the ground beneath a red spray. The shooter's wife screamed and the children cried. The shooter ordered them back into his car and drove off, leaving the dead man lying beside his car.

We finally arrived at Miller's Trading Post, which was about half way to Belvedere, and found the makeshift store noisy with haggling, as loiterers warmed their hands around a wood-burning stove. Just like the health insurance company scams, the Snap didn't hurt everybody equally. Miller had sentries taking turns outside to protect the operation from carpetbaggers. We didn't like seeing automatic weapons, but we also knew they would be necessary for a time.

We were able to make some equitable trades with our woven goods and ceramics in exchange for meal and hardware. We were still settling up when a loud gray block of a woman told another, "I wish we knew what was going on in the world."

"I'd give my ass for a newspaper," another one griped. "For just one Sunday *Washington Post* to read with a good cup of coffee."

"The Snap sent us back to before Gutenberg—you get your news by word of mouth."

Abigail brightened, and I didn't like the look in her eye.

"Luray—why don't you start a newspaper? Or a news service from what we monitor on the radios?"

"Yeah right. Line up the trucks and rush out the morning edition."

The woman overheard. "Trucks? Hell, buddy, all you'd need to do is drop a couple hundred copies right here. You'd sell out in a day."

"Sure, start a newspaper," I said ruefully. "Roll the presses—I'll call it the *Post Washington.*"

Sixteen

Abigail's Dream

BY EARLY APRIL, we were numb with the hangover of winter and the relentless rationing of food and firewood. Our general appearance had deteriorated to frontier couture. The new charter and laws had done little for our morale. Irritability was the only commodity we had in abundance, and we still gave in to occasional outbursts over little things. Abigail obsessively regretted that we'd had no time before the world ended to show other communities how to survive as we did. I tried lamely to reassure her. At least we were of one mind where Edwinna's baby was concerned. Ed was due any day and everyone pampered her.

To avoid having to heat the store building just for the radios, we had moved them into Anomalies and set them up on a table in the corner. Willow Ann and Grigny monitored with their headsets.

With a lift of her chin, Abigail indicated Willow Ann. Tears were streaming down the girl's face, and she glanced over at us.

Fleeta squeezed her granddaughter's shoulder.

"What's the matter, sweetie? What's wrong?"

She removed the headphones. "Dan Dade's on the air. You'll all want to hear this."

Georgie installed himself beside me, his brows working, as Willow Ann tuned in the Salem, Indiana ham and switched on the speaker. Dan had reluctantly become the nation's anchorman for all that was known, suspected, or rumored. There were others like him here and there doing much the same thing, but owing to a network of working repeaters, most areas of the country could monitor him.

In a droll patter, he lampooned a Walter Winchell broadcast from radio's golden age.

"Good evening Mr. and Mrs. North and South America if anyone's left, and no more ships at sea. Let's go to press.

"The latest from the New Government of Illinois: electrical power is up thirty percent in Springfield, but is expected to dwindle as the coal stocks and natural gas run out. 'That will be sometime in the summer,' the Gov said—

bet they can't wait. Engineers are asked to work on conversion and anyone who wants to start mining coal again should step forward—be sure to bring a shovel. Good luck with that, Gov. Maybe it's time that even you learn how to tote that bale.

"On a sadder note, the North African siroccos have brought the gift of radiation from Jerusalem and Tehran to South Florida—killing off some old folks and babies, apparently. Radiation was confirmed in Sardinia, Spain, and some place called Aquitaine. Also the Caucasus, so cheer up, comrades, death by radiation may visit your town real soon. Unless it gets me first—I'll keep you posted with all the latest rumors.

"On a lighter note: since we've all been thrown back to life in the 1880s, it seems that our first continental tradition is being breech born as we speak. This reporter has learned of communities around the nation who have succeeded in following the progress of a certain village in the wilds of Virginia.

"Sometime last year, CNN—remember TV?—did a story about Dunkard Bottom—that's right, the community started by Abigail and Luray Flitch, publishers of *Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World*—and their little one-horse mountain hamlet that they restored and jazzed up with solar panels. Well, now the number of burgs doing the same is a hundred eighty-two, last count. We're talkin' Groveton, Texas; Anoka, Minnesota; Chanute, Kansas; and Boonville, Kentucky—I could list them all, and maybe I will some time when there's nothing else to talk about. Anyway, they've declared April 14 Dunkard Bottom Day, if you feel like putting on your party hats.

"And if you're listening, Luray and Abby, congrats to you from all of us out here in the hinterland. You've inspired people short and tall to get themselves over the Big Snapperoo. If you've got any hooch, people, raise a glass to those brave souls out there in Dunkard Bottom for showing us how it's done."

Abigail's face was wet, and mine about to be. I pulled her close.

"I hail Luray from time to time, and this ole Hoosier never felt so proud to know somebody. Luray, why don't you give us a report from Dunkard Bottom? If you've got anything useful to say, we'll put it out there for mass consumption.

"This is Dan Dade broadcasting daily, if I feel like it, to a nation mercifully free of its leaders. You got emergencies? Good news, bad news, gripes, or scuttlebutt? Let me hear about it. This is Dan Dade signing off until whenever."

The citizens of Dunkard Bottom burst into table-pounding and hoots and yells of pride. We looked into each other's eyes for the first time in months. Did *we* do that? *Us?* Yes we did.

Mad Mickey brought out a tray of paper cups and a magnum of champagne that we'd freebooted during our last midnight raid—but she brought apple juice for the kids and Hermes. We toasted and sang, and Abigail was embarrassed with a grin she could not stifle. The citizens escorted her to the stage platform and sat her in a captain's chair. Ben strummed *Queen of Hearts* on his guitar, and they wrapped her in one of Tillie's blankets. They adorned her head with a wreath of mountain laurel. Her wide grin looked like it hurt—I'd never seen her so happy since the first night we danced together under the moon at Belvedere.

The day of Dan Dade's newscast was the turning point for us. It told us we were going to make it, and because of our work, a lot of other people would, too. The doldrums of winter were lifting. The residents were coming alive again. Ben and about-due Edwinna played reels and jigs. We sang and danced—it was just the good news we needed to feel human again.

After the long, hard winter, the grimy villagers heated water, spent a day bathing and giving each other haircuts. The men hacked away at their beards and shaved. We had a lot to be thankful for. Our bodies had become lean, strong, and healthy. No one begrudged the loss of meat and dairy anymore, not even Hagerty and Beecher. No gym or health-food store could have produced a more fit and trim community. The Man of Law himself, who had lost weight, admitted that he had never felt better in his life.

Over the next few days, we prepared lists of what we thought would be helpful to those communities and passed them along to Dan. The lists included things we had done right as well as things we'd flubbed. We talked about the importance of neighbors and urged people to seek out their local Native Americans for wisdom and medicine.

That very night, the village voted on an ordinance declaring April 14 as Dunkard Bottom Day henceforth and forevermore. That was also the first story in the fledgling *Post Washington,* which I had begun to organize on Abigail's laptop. The second story was the arrival of Edwina and Ben's son Jeremiah, born at 3:02 a.m., with Tillie and Bluebell as midwives. Hermes asked how soon he'd be able to help with the garden.

♦ ♦ ♦

Thanks to Hermes Dill, our greenhouse lettuce and spinach starts were thriving and would be ready to plant at month's end. Even in the cold late winter, we exchanged labor with the Amish and other farmers within ten miles of us, and we always traveled armed—everybody did, just to protect ourselves from the Failed World Order. Even Mr. Vogt carried his ancient shotgun when they drove the horses and equipment to our place to help out

and also keep an eye on our mistakes. We mainly defended ourselves by following the Art of Peace, that is, by waging no war at all. Despite the relentless pink light, we abandoned the old paved roads, preferring instead new paths, wagon trails and horse trails of our own making. We stayed together and out of sight in what Fleeta was calling the New Jerusalem, the valley that the regional farmers once called Eden.

Anomalies had become our town hall, and since it looked like Dunkard Bottom was going to succeed and grow roots, we held meetings often. Grigny often popped off-the-wall comments on subjects known only to him.

"It's the end of madness," he said one night. "Feeling new inside. The end of the demons hold on the world—"

"Since the beginning," Edwinna said, nursing her tiny Jeremiah.

"Not the beginning," Grigny corrected, "but before the Flood."

We waited for more explanation, but that's all he had to say. Willow Ann patted his shoulder.

Edwinna addressed us generally. "I still wonder what 'synthetic consciousness' means. It says in the Guide, 'Numb are the children in synthetic consciousness.' What's that?"

Hermes filled the silence. "Grigny just answered it."

"Grigny," Willow Ann began. "You answered the question before it was asked."

"I did?"

Beecher brought up the papers we found in the Henry J on the way back from Warrenton.

"Remember what it said?"

During that harrowing drive I was worried about Abigail to read them.

"The papers?" Abigail asked. "What papers?"

Grigny explained how we found more Permelia papers in the Henry J.

"That was weeks ago," Abby charged. "When were you going to tell me, Luray?"

"Now?"

Beecher plopped the papers onto the table, and Abigail picked them up. She began to read:

> The demons shall devour:
> Every family, farthing, and homestead;
> Every poisoned acre and dirty drop of water—

"We already heard that," I winced.

"Not all of it," Grigny said. "Read it, Miss Abigail. Read the riddle all the

way through."

Abigail read the section aloud while Grigny recited silently along with her.

> The demons shall devour:
> Every family, farthing, and homestead;
> Every poisoned acre and dirty drop of water—
> And the men and all the women
> Shall drown the sons and daughters
> In forgetfulness as in ancient days.
> And the demons shall devour each other,
> To the death over every last spoil
> Until not one sane shall remain
> Save those whom wisdom waited for
> And hammered swords into plows,
> For this shall be the demise
> Of the age of war forevermore.

Hermes pouted. "If the Snap means the end of war, maybe what Grigny and his hacker buddies did was worth it."

Abigail found something else in the papers.

"Listen to this. Permelia wrote: 'A swoon in the yellow dazzle of dawn, but I fear my mind is leaving me. My visions make no sense. A wizard shall silence the tongues of the world. But the wizard that set the storm in motion will gather the stars in a vast net and call to them, and they will answer, and the doors of memory and sanity will open once more."

"Grigny," I started, "Your hacks killed the Internet and communications. In a sense you silenced the tongues of the—"

But Grigny had just left and closed the door behind him.

"Where did he go?"

Amanda observed, "Must have hit another nerve."

"So what about the synthetic consciousness?"

Hermes offered his own thoughts on the matter. "The old world was entirely synthetic, we just didn't know it. No one's here to tell us what to believe anymore, how to vote, what to buy, or how to be entertained. There's no media promoting drugs or stoking artificial desires that can never be fulfilled. No one's telling you every day from the TV tube that you're not attractive enough, sexy enough, or rich enough, or voting the wrong way. The personality cult of pop music and actors is gone. That was the old way—believing it real created the synthetic consciousness. We'd forgotten how to appreciate

the beauty of our world. That was the synthetic consciousness. So the cost of waking up was losing the beauty itself. In this pink landscape, nature will continue to adapt and life here will be hard. But we are equipped to survive if we have a higher consciousness. An unbent knowledge of right and wrong, that we had forgotten. Of love versus hate. Of helping versus hurting. Those of us who embrace life free of the synthetic world will survive. Those who still believe in acquisition, competition, aggression, force, and deception will starve. That's what synthetic consciousness means. It's clear in every tradition of the world. From now on, we must stay conscious of what is real. Food. Shelter. Safety. Healthy land and clean water. Respect. I believe this could count as the new consciousness."

♦ ♦ ♦

We dispersed back to our various chores, but as Abigail and I stood up to leave, Grigny returned carrying a dirty aluminum attaché case.

"See?"

"Uh, see what?" I asked him. "What's in the case?"

It was filled with orderly binders of software disks.

"What's all this?" Abigail asked.

"It's the future," he hissed, handing it to me. "Hold this."

He dashed into the kitchen where he grabbed a big metal salad bowl right out of Mickey's hands, and ran outside with great urgency.

He tugged at Willow Ann's arm. "To the radio shack. Hurry! —and bring the case."

Grigny led Willow Ann over to the store.

"It's just Grigny being Grigny," Tillie observed.

In the late afternoon, however, we found Fleeta, Claire, and Jeffey outside staring up at the store roof. Mickey's salad bowl was up there pointing skyward. A wire snaked across the roof and into our bedroom window.

Several of us went upstairs to the apartment where we found Grigny and Willow Ann bent over a nest of circuit boards, wires, and components. The ham radio was connected to the laptop which was scrolling miles of code.

"What's all this?" I asked.

An excited Grigny held up various software disks, yammering on about COMS applications and security-breaking software that he'd used at the DOD, and unfortunately, I surmised, to eventually microwave the modern world back to the Middle Ages.

Willow Ann regarded him with awe. "We are accessing a satellite, everyone."

Grigny smiled, almost maternally. "With this, we can teach the whole

world how Dunkard Bottom works. We'll create a new open and free Internet."

I recalled words from the new Permelia Lyttle papers: "'And the wizard shall collect the very stars in his net.' She must have meant the satellites. Or some kind of network."

Grigny was busy testing the satellite hookup. He and Willow Ann had coded some type of application that would automatically scan the high satellite frequencies for traffic—sort of like our own little NASA.

Seconds later, a voice emitted from the radio speaker. "This is Butte Command, Ogden. Who is trespassing on my satellite?"

Our faces grinning, we simultaneously shouted, "Dunkard Bottom, Virginia!"

Willow Ann looked at Grigny and shivered. "Genius. Pure genius."

♦ ♦ ♦

As the days passed, we realized how much we'd learned from the other farmers. We valued their skills and friendship. We knew we would never have survived the winter without them. Our boys learned skills that astounded us when they demonstrated them at home—quick repairs, inventive carvings, and contraptions that used gravity to get the job done instead of muscle power. Mr. Vogt showed us how to turn the ceramics shop back into a smithy and taught Beecher how to repair metal with a bellows, hammer, and anvil, with the suspected personal agenda of turning him into a first-class regional blacksmith.

Something like a crafts guild formed. Georgie apprenticed in the mill, learning everything Mr. Miller knew about milling, moisture content, and trading, too. Jennifer discovered her life's work, learning how to drive a team and take care of horses. Our young people liked the "new" ways so much, they did more than their fair share, both on Mr. Vogt's acres and ours.

The alpacas surprised us with two healthy cria, who became the darlings of the village, though Jason guarded them jealously, thinking our fawning ridiculous and counterproductive. With the spring came sheering. Fleeta spun, carded, knitted, and wove in Tillie's mini-textile mill. Connor's stock of jugs, cups, and bowls became popular at the trading post. Claire and Jeffey—well, we just let them enjoy being kids.

The community was glad to have Amanda Hagerty teaching school, which we scheduled after their share of the morning farm work was done. She devised a curriculum of the three Rs and other things that would prepare them for life after the Snap. Other area children attended, too. Ben and Edwinna taught music, and Abigail taught art. As for supplies, within an easy drive

were dozens of vacated suburbs full of all the supplies we needed.

Bluebell Marks used Amanda's classroom to start a School of Natural Medicine. She had eight students from various settlements, and as the herbs and roots were now growing, you would catch Bluebell leading her pupils on plant-identification walks. Chief Howard Shepherd, Thomas Bright Eagle, and other tribe members would come around once in a while and teach us skills in the woods and fields, how to find flints among the river stones, and tie good knots. They also taught economics, conservation, and the principles of barter. Tillie and Bluebell had successfully delivered Edwinna's baby, and would deliver Willow Ann's—and all the babies yet to come.

♦ ♦ ♦

Spring brought warm days and a sense of confidence that we were going to make Dunkard Bottom thrive. Over the winter, Abigail had taught Tillie and Fleeta basic millinery—how to make Edwardian-style hats—in so doing, giving our community another commodity with which to trade. Hats had regained the function they once served: shielding the face, neck, and shoulders from the elements. The little kids wore straw hats and bonnets they'd been given by their Amish friends, and they had found two old high-wheel bicycles, penny farthings, upon which they learned to ride. They made hoop-and-sticks games from old barrels. A hand-made toy industry wouldn't be far behind.

Dunkard Bottom Day inspired Abigail to revive her Promenade around the Main-and-Needful walking loop. We hadn't walked the Promenade since fall, and the citizens were glad to reclaim a few hours of what we used to call leisure time—we walked the Promenade, admired the restored armillary, and accepted *la vie en rose* as a fact of life. Every one of us was homesick for the way it used to be: eye-blue skies, trees every shade of green, the giddy paradise of a field of wildflowers, birds, bees, and rabbits. We had yet to see birds in flight, but Claire Hagerty said she saw a dove sitting on an old power line.

In all modesty, I impart that on the Promenade no one was decked out more stylishly than Abigail and I. We wore the fancy tailored outfits she'd made for us back at Belvedere, long before everything collapsed. Abigail wore a frilly ankle-length dress, white gloves, and the fanciest hat of all. I was proud to offer her my arm and tip my hat to passersby as in the days of old.

That first Dunkard Bottom Day unfolded under a roseate candy sky. Abigail twirled her parasol on her shoulder and nodded at the villagers with civility and respect. It felt good to admit that her intuition and stubborn insistence about Dunkard Bottom had been correct. The village was my home

now and its people my family. It was a Utopia of our own design—one that she'd built from the ground up. We'd groomed a cooperative community through mediation and persuasion. Politics, if you will, with a self-policing, egalitarian heartbeat.

We walked the Promenade together with Jason happily trotting beside us. We observed certain changes in Dunkard Bottom. Beecher and Willow Ann chose May 10 for their wedding. Hermes could no longer work outside, so he stayed in the kitchen on a stool as Mad Mickey's sous chef. Neither of them saw much reason to marry and also refused to move in together. To Hermes, Mickey was still the farm girl from Savannah.

Young Georgie and Jennifer had exchanged engagement rings of woven grass without asking their parents. They wanted to get married, too. The matter was taken up at a council meeting, of course. No one could think of a good reason why they shouldn't marry at fifteen and seventeen. College was no longer a viable goal, so the village gave their approval. The kids just shrugged, thanked us, and ran off to help Mr. Miller get the mill ready for the new season.

A furor erupted when the Man of Law caught Jeffey and a neighboring girl playing post office in the post office. The Man of Law assured their parents that he'd keep it locked from then on—but with square miles of woods and pasture to get lost in, we weren't sure it would have much effect. They simply galloped over to the oak tree to play on Beecher's swing.

The Man of Law had been married twice before, and was enjoying his peace and quiet. However, a single, matronly former insurance agent in Bluebell's medicine class had made overtures more than twice. Several of us placed bets on whether she'd eventually wear him down.

With summer came Abigail's midnight waltzes in the orchard under the red moon—clothed, of course—with Strauss playing on the Victrola and a chorus of humming alpacas to accompany. Willow Ann and Jennifer put together a radio broadcast, Radio Dunkard Bottom, in which they reviewed principles of how the village had been planned and built and how to use the same principles in their own communities. Guest speakers included Tillie on weaving, Connor on pottery, and Amanda Hagerty on how to set up a school. Using the radio equipment, Grigny and Willow Ann were able to hack into the satellites and share simple applications with pockets of people who also had some basic tech.

Walking the Promenade that day were Beecher and the pregnant Willow Ann excitedly discussing plans as only newlyweds will do.

"She's due in August," Abigail squeezed my hand. "Did you know she's going to let Bluebell's entire class deliver the baby?"

"Men too?"

"Anyone can attend," Willow Ann had remarked.

"That's what I call—magnanimous. Looks like natural childbirth is back in fashion."

Abby took my arm. "Well, I'm looking forward to it myself."

"That's commendable, Abby. A level of bravery that I don't think men will ever understand."

A few steps later, what my wife had just told me sank in.

"Abigail, you mean—you?"

She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and smiled like the day she told me she had bought a town.

"We're going to have a baby!" I shouted.

Jason barked his approval.

I turned her around, lifted her up at the waist, and kissed her vigorously in front of everyone. I believe her feet were a good distance off the ground. The citizens applauded us.

♦♦♦

I suppose that ends the story of how Abigail Flitch's village in the hollow came to be, and herewith the chronicle that records it for posterity. The old world had self-destructed in a snake pit of greed and war, but our first Dunkard Bottom Day was really only the beginning of the new world to come, one in which lies weren't cool anymore, and good could not be had without a lot of work expended in big gardens of effort, row by row. We didn't know if another more final end would befall the world. Reports continued on the migration of radiation clouds. Communities that had resorted to fighting soon vanished. Massacres occurred now and then when self-appointed militias got confused as to their roles. However, we made up our minds not to live in fear. I came to understand there is an intelligence at the core of the universe that, if left to its own without interference, wanted to unify, embrace, heal, love, and feed the world.

I rejected Dan Dade's assessment that self-destruction is human nature. I blamed the Merchants of Death of all ages for that, those who through every age coveted power and wealth and waged war to take it all. It was they who conspired behind the scenes and found others to blame. It was they who pushed the buttons, not Amanda Hagerty or Connor Miggs. It wasn't the farmer planting rice in Thailand or the woman dying fabric in India. It wasn't the weaver in Peru, or even the quarreling neighbors in Morrisville, New Jersey, or men who mowed their own lawns on a Saturday afternoon. It wasn't the lady gathering spring flowers or the school girl trying out for soccer. It

wasn't the kid who collects carts at the grocery store or the retired lady who volunteers at the local soup kitchen.

We are just the people, that's all. We would rather help you with your harvest or give you something to eat or loan you a book than kill anyone. It's not "man" who is intent on destroying himself, it's leaders who lead nations into war and place no value on life itself.

Gangs still roved our countryside, like those invaders who had attacked us at Anomalies. But I firmly believed that they would die out, simply because they can so easily be defeated with a bowl of Mad Mickey's jimsonweed stew. Men like them had steered humankind into believing the worst about itself since the Stone Age, but I had to believe their day was done. The militia and gun manufacturers that blinded us with patriotism are finding that they must take up the plow and learn how to plant seeds, just like everybody else. It was finally time for us to claim our rightful day in the sun, pink though it was.

We would make the best of the wreckage of the old world. Men and women with true hearts were emerging as rightful leaders, rolling up their sleeves, rebuilding towns and villages, and modeling new communities in which violence and greed would become the dusty myths of an ancient culture long gone—a new world community that may be just a little bit like Abigail Flitch's Dunkard Bottom.

The End

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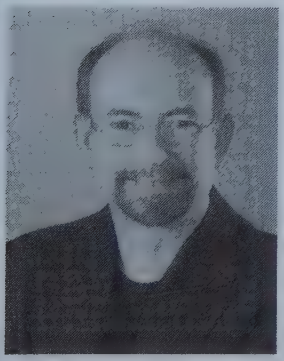
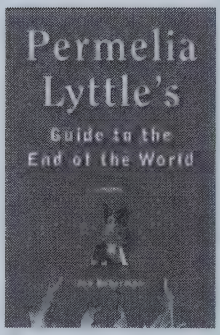
Jon Robertson is the author of several non-fiction books and is a published and produced playwright. Also a book and magazine editor, Jon has experience in newspaper reporting, magazine feature writing, and photography. His articles have appeared in various newspapers, *Writer's Digest,* and *Charleston Magazine.* He is also the founder and publisher of Vegan Heritage Press, LLC, a cookbook publishing company in Woodstock, Virginia.



A native of Mount Pocono, Pennsylvania, Jon attended the Pennsylvania State University and has a B.A. in English with minors in philosophy and education. He is married to author Robin Robertson and lives in the beautiful Shenandoah Valley of Virginia where he writes, publishes, and enjoys life in the country. Visit www.JonRobertson.com for his latest news and fiction offerings.

Order the prequel to ***Dunkard Bottom*** online.

Permelia Lyttle's Guide to the End of the World



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